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Perceptions of Chinese top-up students transitioning through a regional UK university: a longitudinal study using portrait methodology. Doctoral thesis, University of Hull.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Perceptions of Chinese top-up students transitioning  
through a regional UK university: a longitudinal study  
using portrait methodology

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the University of Hull

by

Xianghan O'Dea

January 2020

*To my parents, my husband and my daughter.....*

# Abstract

This thesis seeks to gain a good understanding of the academic and social experiences of a group of Chinese top-up students when they are studying their top-up programme in a UK institution. It adopts the U curve model and Bottery's variation of portrait methodology as the theoretical foundations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which took place three times at the key transition stages of these students during their one-year study period, namely the moving in stage (pre-departure and post arrival), the moving through stage (the start of their top-up programme to the end of the first semester) and the moving out stage (the start of the second semester to the end of their top-up programme). After each interview, written portraits were produced for the participants based on their interview transcripts.

The findings of this thesis suggest that firstly this group of Chinese top-up students seemed to have had a really difficult time during their journey in this UK institution. It appears that their perceptions and some aspects of their behaviour (academic) changed while they went through this one-year study abroad journey, however, other aspects of their behaviour (social) appeared to remain largely the same. Additionally, the transition experiences of most Chinese top-up students in this group seemed to have only partially followed the U curve model. In other words, they experienced the honeymoon, the crisis and the recovery stages, but not the readjustment stage.

This study makes a contribution to both the U curve and the portrait methodology literature by showing that when studying the transitional experiences of international students, attention needs to be paid to the factors at the institutional and national levels, apart from those at the personal level. In addition, the findings demonstrate that portrait methodology may produce very different insights when it is applied to different groups of people.

# Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my original work, except explicit attribution is made. None of this thesis has been previously submitted for any other award.

# Acknowledgement

Firstly and most sincerely I would like to thank my supervisors Professor Mike Bottery and Professor Kevin Burden for their encouragement, support and assistance throughout the years. I would like to give special thanks to Professor Mike Bottery, who has guided and helped me develop and boost confidence in conducting academic research.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

This study is about the experiences of Chinese international students studying in the U.K. In particular, it looks at the perceptions of a cohort of Chinese top-up students as they are transitioning through a course of study in a UK institution. In this introductory chapter the background information on the motivation behind this study and the main issues associated with the topic are presented. It also identifies the research gap, that is, there has been very little attention focused on the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students in the UK, and outlines the corresponding main research question and sub questions. A description of the thesis structure is then included to provide an explanation for each individual sub question and the corresponding chapters. Finally, an explanation for research purpose and the significance of the study is provided.

## 1.1 Background

The research idea of this study came from the following areas: my previous experience as an international student and my professional experience as an academic working in a U.K. institution.

### 1.1.1 My personal experience of being an international student

I came to study postgraduate degrees in Ireland and the U.K. in the late 1990s. At the time the number of Chinese students studying abroad began to increase. Between 1999 to 2002, the Irish higher education sector witnessed a big growth in the number of Chinese students (Woods, 2001). At that time, it was much easier to get a student visa for Ireland, and the postgraduate study fees were cheaper than other English-speaking countries.

Study abroad was an exciting but anxious adventure for me. I am the only child in my family, and had never travelled abroad before. This was the first time that I

had to live on my own in a completely new and strange environment for a long period of time. International student support mechanisms in the institution I studied however weren't very good. My fellow Chinese students and I were mainly left alone to cope with the difficulties and challenges we faced. I encountered many personal challenges, which I didn't expect before leaving China. One of the major ones was to adjust to the local educational system. In my home institution in China, I was provided with textbooks on all modules that I was studying. Students were timetabled to attend classes for the whole day, every day, and were often required to take additional independent learning sessions in the evening.

However, in Ireland I wasn't aware initially that textbooks weren't provided and that we had to borrow them from the library or buy them ourselves. I also had to learn to take notes in class because some tutors didn't provide PowerPoint presentation handouts. In addition, we didn't seem to have many classes on a weekly basis, and had to spend most of our time studying independently. I had received some basic training on writing western style assignments in China, but was still struggling to cope with the quantity and intensity of the coursework.

Meanwhile, I had to cope with loneliness. There were 9 Chinese students in the cohort, and I became familiar with them very quickly. However, we were more acquaintances than friends. I didn't feel that we were close enough to talk about the issues and difficulties I was facing. I was able to socially interact with some locals through the part time jobs I was doing, but I didn't have much personal contact with my non-Chinese classmates. Consequently, my academic performance was affected, and I didn't achieve the results that I was aiming for, even though I was confident in my language skills.

I studied at postgraduate level in Ireland for two years and went on to attend an U.K. institution for a master's degree. Due to the similarities between the Irish and British higher education systems, the experience I gained at the Irish institution laid a good foundation for my study in the U.K., for example, I felt that it was much easier to keep up with the classes, and I became more confident in

academic writing and subsequently I was able to achieve much more satisfactory results. Socially I even managed to make friends with a few British classmates and went out with them in the evening.

The support for international students I experienced in this U.K. institution was also much better. I was studying in the branch campus at the time, which was fairly small, but there was a dedicated International Office on campus. The staff were friendly and helpful, and assisted international students in many of the difficult bureaucratic tasks associated with studying in the U.K., for example, they helped all international students renew the student visas, including checking the documents needed, answering our questions, sending and collecting our passports for us.

My own experiences have shaped my initial interest to research in this area. I am keen to explore the individual experiences of other Chinese international students, and seek to understand the problems and challenges they face while living and studying in a very different country.

### 1.1.2 My professional experience of being an academic tutor

Currently I am a full-time lecturer teaching in the Business School in a U.K. institution. The Business School has a large number of Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students, since business related subject areas are popular with Chinese students (UKCISA, 2019). As lecturer, and native Mandarin speaker, it is my responsibility and also an interest, to help Chinese students. I often chat with them before or after class to find out how they are getting on with their studies and what help the School and staff can provide to them. As there is no language or culture barrier between us, it is much easier for me to bond with the students and for them to share their concerns with me. In the past I have discovered the difficulties some Chinese students had with some module content, and I was able to explain to them in Chinese. In addition, I have often spent extra time answering their questions, and providing help in seminars.

Apart from my teaching responsibilities, I am also personal tutor to a group of new students. Before I started this research, some of my tutees were final year Chinese top-up students. This was the first time I had come across this particular type of international students. The top-up students studied an SQA HND (Scottish Qualifications Authority Higher National Diploma) or a similar type of programme in a Chinese institution for three years, and then entered directly onto the final year of an undergraduate degree programme in this institution. At the time when I started this PhD research, the Business School was offering nine top-up programmes, and the majority of top-up entrants were from Mainland China.

As a personal tutor, I was responsible for providing guidance and care to my personal tutees, and paid particular attention to Chinese top-up students. This was because these students were only in this institution for a year, and had to cope with the final year workload pressure, as well as to adjust to the new living and study environment simultaneously. However, I came to realise that it was much harder to bond with these top-up students. Apart from those timetabled tutor-tutee meetings, they didn't actively approach me for help, even though they knew that I was also Chinese. Based on the limited information I gathered, I noticed the following issues: some Chinese top-up students didn't appear to be motivated to study, they seemed to be unsure about the decision they made regarding this study abroad route and almost all of them appeared to find it very difficult to integrate into the university life.

I had a real concern of the situation my tutees were in, and began to wonder whether the issues I discovered applied to other Chinese top-up students studying in this institution. Subsequently I developed an interest in exploring the causes of the problems the Chinese top-up students were experiencing, and was keen to explore how this U.K. institution, including the teaching and support staff, could perhaps provide more appropriate advice and support to Chinese top-up students, and potentially to other international top-up students to help them settle in and gain a better experience in this one-year study.

## 1.2 Research gap

In spite of the fact that China's economic growth started to slow down in 2014, Chinese students have remained the largest group of international students studying in the U.K. Thanks to the development of UK-China higher education partnerships, more Chinese students have chosen to study in the UK via an articulation or a twinning route (OBHE, 2014).

An articulation or a twinning agreement, depending on the individual partnership agreements, is where students normally study in a Chinese institution first for two or three years, and then transfer to study in a UK institution for an additional one or two years. Upon completing their studies in Britain successfully, these students will obtain a U.K. undergraduate degree (HEFCE, 2014). As indicated in the report published by the Higher Education Funding Council (2014: 8), for a combination of reasons, such as the Global Financial Crisis, and the increased number of middle-class families in China, more Chinese students choose to study "short courses with a duration of one academic year or less". The top-up programmes offered in this UK institution are a good example of such.

Chinese students studying abroad is a popular research topic (Dervin, 2011; Yang et al., 2011). However, existing research tends to consider Chinese students as a single category, regardless of the pathway they chose to study in Britain (Edwards & Ran, 2006). In addition, it has placed emphasis on common issues that Chinese students experience, such as language barriers, social anxiety and academic challenges (Andrade, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Zhou et al., 2008; Su & Harrison, 2016).

Although the increased popularity of the top-up entry route is recognized in the higher education sector in the UK, a review of current literature suggests that the attention is mainly on the impact of this pathway on international student recruitment and university income (HEFCE, 2014). There are some studies about top-up students, but they have either focused on a different group of students, such as home students (Barber & Breeze, 2015) or mature students (Brodie et

al., 2009), or focused on a different perspective, such as language and academic literacy (Burns & Foo, 2011). Research on the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students while they are studying in the UK is very limited.

Chinese top-up students, however, are very different from other international students. On the one hand, as with home top-up students, they experience similar academic and social challenges. For example, they are transitioning into a new and much more advanced learning and teaching environment, hence are facing a much steeper learning curve and additional academic related pressure. Both assignments and exams are much harder, the result of which are also expected to reach a much higher quality. They are also trying to fit in an existing student group, and getting to know new friends (Barber & Breeze, 2015). In addition, Chinese top-up students are facing language and communication barriers and need to cope with the transition of moving into a new culture and living environment in a short period of time. Consequently, the individual experiences of Chinese top-up students may change significantly through this one-year study.

Most research to date has mainly explored post-arrival institutional level support to international students. There has been very little attention devoted to pre-departure academic and social support and its impact on top-up students' adjustment (Akli, 2012; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). Nevertheless, it is suggested that it is important to provide such help to Chinese top-up students, because of the more significant challenges these students are about to encounter abroad, as mentioned above, and also because research shows that international students embarking on a short-term study abroad journey tend to feel more anxious before leaving their home country (Brown & Aktas, 2011; Daly, 2011).

### 1.3 Research purpose and research design

I am interested in this research topic, because of my personal experience as an international student, but also because I have been involved in teaching and supporting Chinese top-up students in the Business school. Therefore, it seems important to gain a better understanding of this particular group of international



students.

The purpose of this research is to investigate and understand how the perceptions of individual Chinese top-up students change during this one-year study. Portrait methodology, a qualitative methodological approach is chosen for this study because it provides an insight into individual experiences of these students at a particular moment in time. A full rationale behind the decision to adopt the portrait methodology is provided in the methodology chapter (chapter five) later. Briefly, though, this methodological approach is based upon the researcher conducting extensive interviews and then providing written portraits to the participants, in addition to the interview transcripts. The researcher then sends the portraits to the participants for comments and feedback on the accuracy of the portraits to the researcher.

Some of the key aspects of the portrait methodology are as follows. First, it is much easier and more informative for the participants to read a written portrait than an interview transcript. Second, an interview transcript on its own doesn't provide the same level of analysis as a portrait. This is because the former is only a description of what the participants said in the interview, however, a portrait is more of a personal story, and shows the researcher's interpretation of the personal experiences of the participants at each key transition stage during this one-year study. And finally, by having the opportunity to read through all portraits and giving feedback to the researcher, the participants are encouraged and provided with the opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences regularly. This may consequently help the participants develop a better understanding of their experiences.

A sample of 12 Chinese top-up students who studied in the Business School in a UK institution between 2015-16 took part in the research. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, and portraits were produced from this data. The participants were interviewed three times during this one-year period. The first set of interviews took place after they had just arrived in Britain (the moving in stage). The second set of interviews took place at the end of their first semester (the

moving through stage). And the final set of interviews took place at the end of the second semester (the moving out stage).

## 1.4 Significance of the study

As mentioned above, China currently still is the largest country exporting students to study in U.K. higher education institutions. Between 2017-18 there were 106,530 Chinese students studying in the U.K. The number was much greater than India, the second largest country on the list (19,750) (Studying-in-UK.org, 2019). Transnational entries through pathways such as articulation agreements are favoured increasingly by Chinese students, thanks to partnership developments between China and Britain. This is because this type of entry provides Chinese students with an opportunity to experience and take advantage of both the Chinese and British higher education systems. Transnational students, as mentioned already, normally study a two or three-year programme at a home institution first, and enter year two or three of a UK degree programme.

The rise of Chinese top-up students has led to a significant increase in demand for academic and non-academic support not only after their arrival, but more importantly before their departure from China. This is mainly due to the nature of a top-up programme, as its duration is only a year. Academically, the final year of an undergraduate study is also more challenging compared with the previous two years. This consequently creates some pressing challenges for UK higher education institutions. Besides, there is an ongoing concern from the Chinese government and parents, as well as some higher education practitioners in the UK, that the U.K. institutions promoting top-up degrees may lack a good academic reputation, and the main purpose of mass recruitment is to make a profit (Altbach & Knight, 2007; QAA, 2013).

Moreover, the Chinese students who have had unpleasant experiences and gained unsatisfactory results are unlikely to praise the British institution they studied at. This is likely to have a notable impact on future international student recruitment in China because of the “word of mouth” effect, which has a

significant influence in China. The U.K. Higher Education sector will then run the danger of losing the battle in its global competition (mainly in Asia) with other English-speaking countries (Fazackerley, 2007).

So how should U.K. institutions deal with the challenges and help make the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students better? Also, how can education practitioners and partner institutions (both Chinese and British) help these students and their parents make a better adjustment about this particular study abroad route in future? The answers to these questions lie in understanding the actual experiences and needs of Chinese top-up students extensively from all aspects, instead of being restricted to the issues that are already explored in depth in literature.

Thus, the findings of this research provide a more comprehensive view of personal experiences of Chinese top-up students when they study a top-up programme in a UK institution, and make a valuable contribution to the literature, and also perhaps have a direct impact on one institution's learning and teaching practice and international student support.

Additionally, the findings cast new light on the use of portrait methodology and make a meaningful contribution to the current literature. For example, this research shows that portrait methodology may produce different results when it is used to research different groups of people, such as senior professionals and young immature international students. The portraits of school head teachers covered in the literature are able to show their personal strength and ability to manage the situation they are in, since they are much more sophisticated and experienced. In contrast, the portraits of this group of Chinese top-up students showed very little individuality as they hadn't yet fully developed the ability and had little experience to draw upon when they were facing problems and difficulties in Britain.

## 1.5 Research questions

The main research question (MRQ) of this study is:

How do the perceptions of Chinese top-up students change as they are transitioning through a regional UK university?

To answer the key research question, the following sub questions (SQs) will be investigated:

1. What are the background factors associated with Chinese students studying abroad?
2. What does current literature identify as the major issues regarding personal challenges for Chinese international students?
3. What is the most appropriate theoretical understanding of the issue of transition to use in this thesis?
4. Whether, and to what extent, does the transition of Chinese top-up students follow the U curve model?
5. What contributions does the portrait methodology make to understanding the perceptions of Chinese top-up students during their transition?
6. What does the data collected suggest about the principal causes of problems and challenges Chinese top-up students face during their transition?

## 1.6 The structure of the thesis

This first chapter provides an overview of the research background, the purpose of the study, the main and sub questions, and also the significance of the study. It concludes with an explanation of thesis structure.

Chapter two is the first part of the literature review, and addresses SQ (sub question) 1. It inspects a range of contexts including cultural, educational and economic, and in addition, the pre-departure expectations of Chinese students before studying abroad. This chapter also identifies the key push and pull factors that motivate Chinese students to study abroad.

Chapter three is the second part of the literature review, and addresses SQ 2. This chapter explores existing research in regard to personal challenges that Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students face while they are studying abroad, and how they deal with these challenges.

Chapter four is the final part of the literature review, and responds to SQ 3. This chapter evaluates the U curve model and its derivatives, and provides the justification for the appropriateness of the U curve model as one of the main theoretical foundations for this research.

Chapters five and six are methodological chapters, and partially answer SQ5. Chapter five describes portrait methodology, the methodological approach, and also the second theoretical foundation for this study. The justification includes the appropriateness of Bottery's variation, and how it helps enhance the trustworthiness of this research (Bottery et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2018). Chapter six explains the data collection process, such as the methods and techniques, sampling strategy, pilot tests and the predefined interview questions. It also describes and explains how the data collected is interpreted and analysed.

Chapters seven, eight and nine are the findings chapters, and answer SQ 4. Chapter seven focuses on the findings at the moving in stage. That is, the pre-departure academic and social preparations of the participants at the institutional and personal level. Chapter eight reports and analyses the findings at the moving through stage. That is, how well these students were supported and developed during the first half of their study abroad journey. Chapter nine is centred around the moving out stage findings, that is, the personal experiences of the Chinese top-up students, as well as the level of support they received during the second half of their one-year study abroad journey.

Chapter ten is the discussions chapter, and responds to SQ 6. It explores the principal causes of problems and issues this group of Chinese students experience in this year, and categorizes them into three levels: macro, meso and micro.

Chapter eleven is the conclusions chapter, and partially answer SQ5. It synthesizes answers to all research questions, and comes to conclusions regarding each individual sub question, and the main research question. Chapter twelve is the recommendations, limitations and self-reflections chapter. It provides tentative recommendations based on the findings of this particular research, and also suggestions for future research in this area. This chapter in addition outlines the limitations of this research, and provides the researcher's final self-reflections on the use of the U curve model, and the portrait methodology.

## 1.7 Summary

This chapter has provided a rationale for this research study. It started with explaining the contextual information of the chosen research area, and explored a problem that hadn't yet been investigated adequately. This then led to the corresponding main research question and sub questions. A brief description of research purpose and research design was provided afterwards. An explanation on how this research was going to contribute to current literature was also provided. The chapter was then completed with an outline of the thesis structure, as well as a brief introduction of each individual chapter.

The next chapter is the first part of the literature review chapters. It is focused on answering SQ 1, and will explore the background factors associated with Chinese students studying abroad.

# Chapter Two: Background factors associated with Chinese students studying abroad

## 2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided background information of the chosen research topic and area. This chapter forms the first part of literature review, and explores the background factors associated with Chinese students studying abroad. It adopts a “from past to present” structure to provide a historical background first, then narrows the scope down to China’s current economic challenges, and their impact on studying abroad, in particular, in the UK. This chapter also includes an overview of one of the most popular study routes used by Chinese students entering Britain - the top-up entry route and also the motivations of Chinese students studying abroad.

## 2.2 Cultural context

China has over 5,000 years of history, and has developed a rich and varied culture. Some traditional values and views still play an important role in shaping people’s minds and behaviours in modern Chinese society. Influenced deeply by Confucianism, Chinese value education and family very much. Children’s education often becomes the centre of attention in a Chinese family (Huang & Gove, 2012). The imperial examination system is another important part of Chinese culture. As the longest established examination system used in China, it has some profound influences on the current education and examination system (Feng, 1995).

### 2.2.1 The importance of Education in China

Confucianism is the root of Chinese culture, and is the most common Chinese belief (Yan & Sorenson, 2006; Schuman, 2015). The ideology was developed in

between 551-479 BC, by Confucius, the most well-known and respected philosopher, educator and politician in China (Adler, 2011; Zhao, 2018). It is said that Confucius had 3000 students, and 72 disciples among them. The teaching and conversations between Confucius and his disciples were recorded and edited into a famous book, *The Analects*, by his disciples after his death (Eno, 2015). It was then used as a key textbook for teaching and examinations in the dynasties time. The core ideological concept of Confucianism is morality, with the desire to create an ideal society with personalities that are suitable for that society (Eno, 2015).

Confucius places a high value on education and believes that well educated citizens are fundamental to national prosperity and harmony in society (Wong et al., 2012). He also categorizes people into four classes based on their occupation: *shi* (scholars), *nong* (farmers), *gong* (craftsmen) and *shang* (merchants). Scholars are at the top of this social class hierarchy, and are considered as the main decision makers for society (Perry, 1996; Donald & Zheng, 2009; Huang & Gove, 2012).

Influenced strongly by Confucianism, Chinese are highly enthusiastic about education. It is believed that one can be successful in climbing up the social and career ladder by means of education (Boden, 2008; Starr, 2012). Chinese parents pin high hopes on their children's education and future development, and are willing to spend savings on securing the best possible education opportunities for their children (Slater, 2004; Sharma, 2011). For example, the average 20-year-old in China spends almost 50% of per capita consumption on education, compared with less than 25% in America (ICEF Monitor, 2016).

### 2.2.2 Family values

Confucius stressed the importance of family harmony as he believed that families are the basic units of a society, and the society harmony is constructed with harmonious families (Yan & Sorenson, 2006; Huang & Gove, 2012). In his famous theory, "the five cardinal relationships", Confucius categorized five types



of human relationships: *father and son, husband and wife, older and younger, ruler and subject, and friend and friend*. The first three types are family relationships, and compose the basic family hierarchy (Cheng et al., 2004; Zhou, 2009). The relationship between father and son is often treated as the most important one among all relationships (Kim & Park, 2000).

There is a natural bond between parents and children, as “our bodies - to every hair and bit of skin - are received by us from our parents” (Barnhart et al., 1993:81). To maintain the family harmony, parents and children both have responsibilities and obligations to each other (Yan & Sorenson, 2006). For example, parents must look after their children when they are young and make sure that they grow up happily and successfully by providing care and sufficient educational opportunities. In return, children must respect their parents and obey parental authority. Grown up children must also look after elderly parents, grandparents and maybe other superiors in the family. This is defined as the value of filial piety in Confucianism (Hwang, 1999; Wendy et al., 2010).

Since the majority of Chinese parents believe that “education provides the only channel in China for ordinary people to secure a decent life in the future”, and for their children to be able to climb “the ladder of success”, children’s education has always been the centre of attention in Chinese families (Huang & Gove, 2012; Cai, 2018). Over the past few years, Chinese parents have started to invest heavily in private tuition, which they consider as one of the most effective ways of helping their children to cope with the intense competition of the Chinese College Entry Exams and to be admitted to study at a top Chinese university (HSBC, 2017; Cai, 2018). For example, a recent report conducted by HSBC (2017) suggests that 93% of Chinese parents are paying or have paid for private tuition, the highest proportion among the 8,481 parents surveyed in 15 countries and territories (the average is 63%). In responding to the sacrifices parents have made (the investment in education), Chinese children are expected to work hard academically to achieve excellent results in school to meet the expectations of their parents and make them proud (Hazari, 2013; Ma et al., 2018).

### 2.2.3 The imperial examination system and uncreative learning

The imperial examination system is an important part of Chinese culture, and lasted over 1,300 years. It started in Sui Dynasty (581-617), and ended towards the end of Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) (Bastid, 1981; Smith, 1983; Gan, 2008; Li&Li, 2010). As a centralized national exam system, the imperial examination was used to qualify and recruit government officials based on the merits of the candidates, not family or political background (Elman, 2000). One therefore stands a chance to change his fate by passing the imperial examinations. The higher the level that one can pass, the higher position one can obtain in the government. To be successful in the examinations and appointed as a government official was almost the sole route for many poor scholars to improve their social mobility (Cheng, 2010). As a result, children from a very young age were encouraged to study hard to obtain *jinshi* title (one of the highest degrees) to bring fame and wealth to the whole family and achieve career success (Bai, 2014).

During the Sui, Tang and Song dynasties, the exams were still liberal, as candidates were encouraged to elaborate their political views and opinions by answering essay style questions in the exams. Although rote memorization was also tested, critical thinking and political debates were the most important parts. However, from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty, the main purpose of education changed, which was to be successful in the examinations only, and during this period the exam content was gradually limited to the basis of Confucianism - *the Four Books* (the Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean, the Confucian Analects, and the Works of Mencius) and *the Five Classics* (the Book of Poetry, the Book of documents, the Book of Rites, the Book of Changes and the Spring and Autumn Annals) (Gan, 2008; Deng, 2011; Song, 2016).

The “eight-legged essay” was then adopted as the main format for exams. This type of essay was restricted to 700 characters only, and consisted of eight parts.

Each part was only allowed a certain number of sentences (Lederman, 1988; Taylor & Taylor, 2014). As the content of an essay must come from Confucianism classics, all educational effort was on memorizing the Four Books and Five Classics (Cheng, 2010). This greatly restricted freedom of thought, imagination, literacy creativity and the development of reasoning skills (Feng, 1995).

### 2.2.3.1 The impact of the imperial examination system on the National College Entry Examination

The imperial examination system has had some profound impacts on the current Chinese education and examination system, in particular on the gaokao (the National College Entrance Examination), and both systems share many similarities (Feng, 1995; Gan, 2008). For example, as with the imperial examination system, gaokao is also a high-stakes test, and has its own test procedure and format (Yu & Suen, 2005). Gaokao results are also the sole criteria adopted nationally to decide whether a student is to be admitted into a Chinese institution, especially a top one. Meanwhile, the higher education enrolment rate in China is used frequently to measure school and teachers' performance. Gaokao therefore has a great influence on school curriculum and pedagogy. In other words, it is sometimes described as "the beginning or end of a student's future" (Lucenta, 2011: 76).

Consequently, students and teachers only focus on the key subjects that are tested in the exams (Yu & Suen, 2005; Squire, 2014), and students are cultivated to obey teachers' instructions, learn by rote memorization, practice mock tests and past exam papers on a regular basis (Feng, 1995; Sit, 2013). Creativity and the skill of thinking outside the box, as a result, aren't encouraged and supported.

## 2.3 Economic context

The sections above overviewed the Chinese cultural background, and its impact on education. The focus of this part is on the economic situation in China, because there is an increasing belief that in developing countries such as China,

economic growth and higher education development have a positive relation. For example, higher education expansion plays an indispensable role in economic growth, and economic development is also a key factor contributing to higher education development and Chinese students studying abroad (Ma, 2003; Carnoy, 2006; Thomson, 2008; Huang et al., 2009; Heckman & Yi, 2012).

### 2.3.1 Economy in the Mao era (1949 - 1978)

China operated a centrally planned economy prior to 1978, following the steps of the former Soviet Union (Morrison, 2008). Under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong, the central government planned and fully controlled economic production and all major aspects of the economy. For example, the prices for goods and services were set centrally and resources were allocated based on government priorities (Morrison, 2019).

Influenced by the ideology of the Soviet Union, Chairman Mao aimed at converting China from an agricultural country to an industrial country rapidly. A major commitment was to develop the steel industry, and “the great leap forward” started in 1958 as a result of it. At the time, Chinese citizens, including farmers in rural areas were encouraged to give up their jobs and set up backyard production plants to produce more iron and steel to overtake that of the Soviet Union (Li & Yang, 2005).

This campaign produced a large amount of poor-quality steel, and severely affected agricultural production. Consequently, between 1959-1961, China suffered “the Great Chinese Famine”, the largest man-made famine in human history (Branigan, 2013). It was estimated that around 30 million people starved to death (Smil, 1999). By 1961, the annual percentage growth rate of GDP tumbled to the lowest level at -27.3% (World Bank, 2016).

### 2.3.2 Economic reform and opening up in the Deng era (1978 - 2008)

The Chinese economy only started to recover and re-develop after the economic reform. The Chinese economic reform is well known and considered highly successful internationally (Li, 1998; Chow, 2012; Garnaut et al, 2018). Under the leadership of chairman Deng Xiaoping, the reform was launched in December 1978, aiming at transforming the country from a planned economy to a market economy by adopting a gradualist approach (Harding, 2010). The essential part of the reform was decentralization - the central government decided to release the authority to regional governments (Xu, 2006; Lin et al., 2013).

The economic reform began in Agriculture, and a new “household responsibility system” was introduced in 1979. This system allowed farmers in rural areas to lease farmland from the local governments by contracts (Brown & Chen, 1999). In addition, it gave farmers the freedom to plant crops based on market demand, and keep the extra for themselves once they delivered a fixed number of products to the collective as required. The system proved successful and was soon expanded to the whole country.

In 1984, the reform moved onto the inefficient and wasteful state-owned enterprises (SOE) in urban areas (Choe & Yin, 2000). The central government introduced the “contract management responsibility system” in 1987 as an incentive to SOEs. Managers were granted more decision-making responsibilities, and SOEs were allowed to keep a portion of profits after submitting the state-set quota (Firth et al., 2006). In 1985, privatization of SOEs also started at the local level, and was expanded nationally in 1995 (China Labour Bulletin, 2007). Meanwhile, privately owned enterprises were permitted to be established. By the end of 1995, there were a total of 655,000 private firms in China (Liu, 2008).

Between 1987 and 2007, the Chinese average annual percentage growth rate of GDP remained a steady 10%, which was triple the global average (The World Bank, 2016). In 2010, China overtook Japan to become the second largest economy in the world (McCurry & Kollwe, 2011) and in 2014, China overtook the US to become the world's largest economy (Bird, 2014).

As well as dealing with domestic issues, Chairman Deng Xiaoping also initiated an open-door policy in 1979, with an intention to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (Bohnet et al., 1993; Wei, 1995). This policy was an important component of the economic reform. At the early stage, four Special Economic Zones (SEZ) - Shenzhen, Xiamen, Shantou and Zhuhai were created for this purpose. Hong Kong, at the time was the biggest investor, counting for over 50% of foreign direct investment that China received annually between 1984 to 1990, followed by Japan and the US (Wei, 1995). Since the late 1990s, FDI increased significantly, especially after China joined The Worldwide Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2002. By 2003, China overtook the US to become the largest receipt of FDI globally. The annual increase rate of the total exports was maintained at 21.5% between 1998 to 2007 (Zeng, 2011). By 2008, there were 54 economic and technical development zones (ETDZ) in China (Zeng, 2010).

Alongside attracting foreign investment to China, the central government was sending Chinese citizens abroad to receive education, and become high quality professionals. Between 1978 to 1979, around 3000 state sponsored Chinese students studied abroad (Cao, 2008). From 1978 to 2003, 700,200 Chinese students studied in 108 countries and regions worldwide (Zhao, 2011). From 2000, China became the largest country exporting students to study overseas.

### 2.3.3 Economy in the modern era (2008 to present)

Economic growth has continued strongly in China for over 30 years, thanks to the economic reform. However, as with many other countries, China's economy was also affected greatly by the Global Financial Crisis between 2008 and 2009, since China's economy depended largely on exports (Zhu & Kotz, 2011). In order to

deal with the pressure of export decline and minimize the impact, the central government launched a \$586 billion economic stimulus package in 2008. This government directed lending boom provoked the development of new public infrastructures, housing and factories (Lardy & Subramanian, 2012). As a result, China managed to retain a relatively healthy GDP growth rate at 9.6% between 2008 to 2011, and 7.7% between 2012 and 2013 (Morrison, 2014).

But some economists and researchers are warning that monetary policies aren't a long-term solution to the problem. The Chinese economy has become a "white elephant", because it is getting highly expensive to maintain the growth of an imbalanced economy (Chancellor, 2013; Peston, 2014; Balding, 2019). The government has invested heavily in various infrastructure projects to stimulate GDP growth, however, these projects are either left incomplete or unoccupied, and become "ghost towns". Subsequently this has counterproductively produced an economic deceleration (Langfitt, 2015).

Meanwhile, both imports (foreign direct investment) and exports (manufacturing activities) dropped faster than expected. An IMF working paper (Kang & Liao, 2016) suggested the following reasons: first, China was in the process of altering its economic model from relying on investment and manufacturing to consumption and services; second, China was replacing imported goods gradually with its own domestic production; and finally, the strong RMB (Chinese currency) caused weaker exports. Consequently, the Chinese GDP growth has started to slow down in recent years from 10.4% (2010) to 6.7% (2016), and it reached its lowest point in 2018 (6.6%) since 1990 (world economic outlook, 2016; Trading economics, 2017; Morrison, 2019; Tan, 2019).

#### 2.3.4 The rise in household income and the impact of economic slowdown on studying abroad

In spite of China's economic slowdown, individual household incomes and living standards in China continue to increase steadily. From 1995 to 2017, the annual per capita income of urban households in China expanded from 4,279 yuan to

36,396 yuan (statista, 2019). The population of Chinese middle class has also increased rapidly, and it became the world's largest in 2015 (Kersley & Stierli, 2015). McKinsey report (Barton et al., 2013) predicts that by 2025, at least 75% of middle class in China will earn between 60,000 (8677 US Dollar) to 229,000 yuan (33,119 US Dollar) annually. This suggests that studying in a foreign university is no longer an exclusive privilege of rich families. More middle-class parents can afford to pay for their children to receive higher education abroad. As mentioned above, Chinese middle-class families are predicted to spend 12.5 % of overall consumption growth on education between 2015 to 2030. In this respect, China's economic slowdown hasn't affected Chinese student mobility. In fact, the number of Chinese students going abroad to study has strongly increased in recent years, from 523,700 in 2015 to 662,100 in 2018 (Zou, 2019), and the UK has remained the second top study abroad destination for Chinese students (Kennedy, 2019).

## 2.4 Educational Context

As mentioned above, educational and economic development has a close relationship with each other. The economic boom in China stimulated higher education expansion and reform, as well as the development of international partnerships between Chinese and foreign institutions. In addition, the central government intends to create more world class Chinese universities, and improve the overall teaching and research quality of the higher education system.

### 2.4.1 An overview of higher education in China

According to Liu and Wang (2015: 7), the Chinese higher education system is structured mainly in two parts: formal programmes and flexible modes. The former includes regular and adult higher education; and the latter contains "web-based studies and preparation courses for examinations awarding formal qualifications". The regular higher education sector is considered the major component of the higher education system, because it is composed of 90% of higher education institutions in China, and has over 70% of the undergraduate



students (Michel, 2016). Degrees awarded range from a four-year undergraduate bachelor's degree, a 2-3-year master's degree, to a 3-4 doctoral degree (QAA, 2013).

In 2017, there were 28 million Chinese students enrolled to study at higher education level, the gross enrolment ratio (the ratio of those enrolled to those eligible) reached 51 % (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019). At the time, there were 26,31 regular higher education institutions in China (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017). Among them, 112 were considered elite universities, of these, 39 were regarded as the most prestigious ones. The central government invested substantial funds towards them in 1995 and 1999 via Project 211 and Project 985, aiming at improving the quality, and strengthening the academic and research performance of these universities (Li, 2018).

In 2011, the central government decided that both projects would no longer take any new members. Instead, a new scheme "world class 2.0" was launched in 2015 (Zhang et al., 2013; Li, 2018). The plan was to initially develop a small number of world class Chinese institutions and disciplines by 2020 and have more institutions to join this elite group by 2030. By 2050, the overall higher education system in China is to become one of the strongest globally (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2015; Department of Education and Training, n.d.).

The new scheme appears to have worked well so far. For instance, Tsinghua University has become the first ever Chinese higher education institution to reach the top 20 (18th) in the Times Higher Education World Reputation ranking in 2016. It was followed closely by Peking University, which ranked 21st in the table (Bothwell, 2016).

## 2.4.2 The current Chinese higher education issues

As mentioned above, gaokao (the National College Entry Exams) in China is ultimately the most important and toughest exam for the vast majority of Chinese

students (Tan, 2016). Rooted in the imperial examination system, Gaokao is the official entry exam for Chinese higher education institutions to recruit undergraduate students, and is taken by final year senior high school students.

It takes place on the 6, 7th and 8th June each year, and tests students on three key subjects: Mathematics, English, and Chinese, as well as an additional science or social science subject of their choice (Tan, 2016). Gaokao lays enormous pressure on students and their families, because it is the only path for them to enter a Chinese institution, and which institution students have studied at has a significant impact on their future job (Jun & Fan, 2011; Ash, 2016). There were 9.4 million students taking the exam in 2017, but less than half of them (3.7 million) were admitted to university (Zhuang, 2017).

Even though the central government has recognized these issues, education reform in China hasn't yet addressed the fundamental issue - gaokao (Waldmeir, 2014; the Economist, 2018). Consequently, Chinese students are far behind their counterparts in western countries in terms of creativity and innovation, which remains one of the biggest issues of higher education in China (Coughlan, 2013; Waldmeir, 2014).

For the reasons mentioned above, more eligible young applicants are skipping gaokao and choosing to study abroad (Qiang, 2015; the Economist, 2018) instead. Since reaching a peak in 2008 (10.5 million), the number of gaokao candidates started to slip gradually. For example, in 2017, 9.4 million students attended gaokao (Zhuang, 2017). It was 20,000 less than 2015 (9.42 million) (China Daily, 2015; Gao et al., 2018).

As with primary and secondary education, higher education in China also adopts the "spoon feeding" teaching approach. In addition, teaching is delivered commonly in a large class size, with more than 90 students at a time (Chen, 2011). This makes it more difficult for a tutor to engage and communicate with students, hence, restricts the individuality and demotivates students' enthusiasm. In this context, students don't concentrate well in the classroom and aren't used to asking questions or getting involved in class discussion activities (Hu, 2006;

Chen, 2011). For these reasons, most undergraduate students are dissatisfied with the quality of education received (Yin et al., 2014).

Chinese higher education is also criticized for not preparing students effectively for future employment, because the curriculum fails to meet the needs of modern society (Dai, 2011; Huber et al., 2011). Teaching relies heavily on tutors transferring theoretical knowledge from textbooks, students then lack ability to complete practical work, since they are seldom offered opportunities to work as a team or on projects to find practical solutions to problems (Farrell & Grant, 2005; Yin et al., 2014).

### 2.4.3 The internationalization of higher education in China

Part of education reform in China is to internationalize higher education, and an important aspect of this is the development of transnational partnerships between Chinese and western institutions (Montgomery, 2016). By 2017, there were 275 approved joint programmes between Chinese and British universities to operate in China (QAA, 2017). These partnerships offer more flexibility and options for Chinese students to study abroad. Between 2012-13, nearly 2,000 Chinese students came to the UK to top-up their HND qualification gained previously in China. This number comprised 67% of total transnational students (3,000) entering the UK higher education with an HND qualification (HEFCE, 2014; Ilieva, 2015; British Council, 2019). Between 2013-14 there were more Chinese students coming to study in the UK (4.1%) via transitional routes than other entry routes (3.5%). The related details in relation to transnational pathways are provided in chapter three (HEFCE, 2015).

Even though the authorities in the UK have stopped providing the latest data in relation to articulation agreements, due to the fact that this type of agreement is considered mainly as an international student recruitment tool, more institutions and colleges are providing top-up programmes to students, particularly international students. For example, by 2019 over half of the universities and FE colleges in England (149 out of 280) were offering 997 top-up programmes, and

almost all of them provided specific entry requirements for international students, especially Chinese students to study this type of programme (McNamara & Knight, 2017; AOC, 2019; UCAS, 2019).

#### 2.4.4 HND teaching in China

Chinese students have an option to study either a BTEC (the Business and Technology Education Council) or an SQA (Scottish National Qualifications Authority) HND qualification in China, but the latter appears to be more popular (Burnapp & Zhao, 2011). Since 2004, around 26,000 Chinese students have gained an SQA HND in China (SQA HND Guide for Parents and Students, n.d.; launch of SQA HND Ambassadors China, 2016). Through the collaboration with the Chinese Service Centre for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE), about 30 Chinese institutions are in a partnership with and are accredited to deliver teaching and award students with this qualification (SQA, 2016).

A SQA HND is credit based, and students are required to attend a two-year study to achieve 30 credits in total. Nevertheless, a CSCSE-SQA HND programme is normally three years, including a foundation year (year one), and its emphasis is on language training (HND Guide for Parents and Students, n.d). HND qualifications are designed with particular job sections in mind, and focus on meeting the needs of future employers.

It is said that the teaching approach of HND programmes in China is different from the traditional Chinese approach, since the intention is to develop students' problem-solving skills (SQA, 2016a). For example, teaching is delivered in English, and adopts a more learner centred approach, such as group work, role play, and tutorials. Most units are assessed by coursework, and on a pass or fail basis only. Students are required to complete projects or practical work (HND Guide for Parents and Students, n.d; Burnapp & Zhao, 2011).

## 2.5 Chinese students' motivations for studying abroad - push and pull factors

As mentioned above, the interest of many Chinese students in relation to studying abroad has shifted towards transnational entry routes through partnerships, such as top-up programmes. Chinese top-up students are very different from other international students due to the nature of top-up programmes. For instance, the duration of this type of programme is one-year, and Chinese top-up students commonly experience a very steep learning curve to adapt to the new living and study environment. They also have to cope with the pressure and intensity of the final year study at the same time.

Even though the UK currently is one of the most favoured destinations, Chinese students have options to study a top-up programme in other countries, such as the US, Australia and New Zealand (HND Guide for Parents and Students, n.d.). In this respect, it is even more challenging for UK higher education institutions offering top-up programmes to provide a high level of service and to meet the expectations of this special group of Chinese students. In order to do so, it is essential for these institutions to understand the reasons why Chinese students choose to study abroad, that is, the push factors that are associated with China, and the pull factors that are associated with the UK (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This section focuses mainly on the pull factors, because the sections above have already described the push factors in detail, such as the importance of education in China, the rise in Chinese household income and the development of Chinese and UK higher education partnerships.

In general, most Chinese students have a very positive view and desired expectations about Britain. They consider British people "well mannered", "friendly" and "kind" (Philo, 2007). The in-depth interviews carried out by Philo (2007) also disclosed an interesting finding: for some Chinese students, the image of Britain comes from classical English novels and films, such as *Pride and Prejudice*. Recent research in this area has suggested the following key pull

factors within the UK, in addition to the general views: English speaking environment, the quality of the UK higher education degrees, future employment opportunities and British culture (Huang, 2013; Wu, 2014).

### 2.5.1 English speaking environment

Many Chinese students choose to study in Britain because of its native language environment (Wu, 2014). To date, English is the top foreign language learnt in China, also a key subject tested in gaokao (Su, 2013; Gamlam, 2016). In spite of the fact that the language is taught in schools and universities in China, Chinese students are generally good at or more comfortable with written grammar, and less fluent at listening and speaking in English (Li, 2014; Mukerji & Tripathi, 2014). As they recognize the importance of a command of English language to enhance future employment in the job market, Chinese students are highly motivated to improve and even master their language skills to prepare themselves for the growing international trade (Rawlings & Sue, 2013).

### 2.5.2 The quality and reputation of the UK higher education

Chinese students and their families also think highly of the quality of the British higher education (Huang, 2013; Wu, 2014). According to the recent QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) list, the British higher education system is ranked the 2nd best globally, right after the U.S. (B2B marketing, 2019). The research capacity in many subject areas, such as Computer Science, Medicine, Law and Engineering are also considered “world leading” (British Council, 2017). Chinese students coming to study in Britain expect to have more opportunities to acquire valuable knowledge and expertise which may be available only in top elite institutions in China.

### 2.5.3 Future employment opportunities

More and more Chinese overseas students choose to return to China after studying abroad. Data published by the Ministry of Education in China (2018)

suggests that in 2017, the number reached 480,900, which was about 80% of total outbound Chinese students of that year (600,000). The UK higher education degrees and the skills students gained in British institutions are valued highly by Chinese employers (British Council, 2014 a; Wu, 2014). A recent study conducted by Mok and his colleagues (2018) on Chinese international students shows that 90% of those being researched found a job within 6 months after they returned back to China, and tend to earn a better salary than their counterparts who studied in a local institution in China.

## 2.5.4 British culture

Experiencing British culture, and subsequently gaining a better understanding of it seems to be another main reason that Chinese students choose to study in the UK (Huang, 2013; Li & Qi, 2019). Prior to arrival, the impression of British culture is moderately positive: it is a culture of politeness, for example, British are often friendly and kind. People care about each other and treat each other well. Similarly, British are believed to have the culture of public morality, which is reflected in the “giving” and “trusting” welfare system (Philo, 2007). In addition, studying in the UK enables Chinese students to have a much closer contact with western culture, and subsequently gain a better understanding of it (Huang, 2013).

The main pull and push factors mentioned above are summarized in the table below:

Push factors	Pull factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The importance of education in China</li> <li>● The rise in Chinese household income</li> <li>● The Chinese education and exam system</li> <li>● The development of the Chinese and UK higher education partnerships</li> <li>● The current Chinese higher education issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● English speaking environment</li> <li>● The quality and reputation of the UK higher education</li> <li>● Future employment opportunities</li> <li>● British culture</li> </ul>

Table 2.1 the main push and pull factors

## 2.6 Summary

This chapter formed the first part of the literature review, and was designed to answer the sub question one - *what are the background factors associated with Chinese students studying abroad?* It began with a broad overview of Chinese traditional culture and Confucianism. The latter is the foundation of the former, and has a great influence on economic and higher education development in China. Three areas were included in cultural context: the importance of education in China, family values and the imperial examination system and uncreative learning.

The second part summarized the economic development in China from Mao, Deng to modern era. Economy growth links closely to higher education development. The economic reform and open-door policy in the Deng era, in particular, contributed positively to the growing size and incomes of Chinese middle-class population, and consequently, stimulated the development of Chinese higher education internationalization and Chinese students studying abroad. Even though the economic growth in recent years hasn't been as significant as it was in the last several decades, the number of Chinese students studying abroad is increasing positively.

The third part focussed on higher education development in China, and covered four areas: an overview of higher education in China, current issues in higher education, learning and teaching in higher education, and Chinese higher education internationalization. Alongside the economic reform, the central government also started education reform, and has invested heavily in the sector to develop world class Chinese universities.

Nevertheless, due to the profound impact of the imperial examination system, Chinese education is still exam driven, and puts tremendous pressure on school children to pass the gaokao successfully. In this context, more families are choosing to skip gaokao and send their children to study abroad instead. Top-up entry has become a popular option for Chinese families. Following this route,



many Chinese students have decided to study a three-year SQA HND programme in China first, and top the qualification up in a British institution to gain a British undergraduate degree.

The final part explored Chinese higher education internationalization, with a particular focus on students' motivation to study in the UK, and the attention was primarily on understanding the pull factors within the UK, which were summarized in four areas: English speaking environment, the quality of the UK higher education degrees, future employment opportunities and British culture.

Britain is currently still one of the most popular destinations for Chinese students. Almost all students aim at improving and mastering their English language skills via the study experience in Britain. Since the UK higher education degrees are highly valued by Chinese employers, the experience of studying in the UK therefore appears to put Chinese students in a more competitive position and help them find a job quicker once returning to China. In addition, Chinese students are attracted by British culture, and are hoping to understand western culture better while studying in the UK.

After exploring the background factors associated with Chinese students studying abroad, the next chapter will investigate the personal challenges identified in current literature in relation to Chinese international students.

# Chapter Three: The main challenges Chinese international students face and the proposed adequate pre-departure preparations

## 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter offered an overview of background factors relating to Chinese students studying abroad from a broad historical perspective. It focused mainly on three aspects: cultural context, economic development and educational context.

This chapter forms the second part of the literature review. The main purposes are to describe the personal challenges Chinese students face, as identified in current literature, and also to discuss the proposed adequacy of pre-departure preparations of the participants at the personal and institutional levels. The chapter is comprised of four sections. The first section presents the definitions of key terms used in this study. The second section is centred around examining personal challenges of Chinese international students. The third and fourth sections describe and discuss the meaning of adequate preparations, and the pre-departure language, academic and social preparations at the personal and institutional levels.

## 3.2 Definition of terms

The following definitions are used for the purpose of this study.

### 3.2.1 Transnational pathways and articulation agreements

Transnational pathways are a type of study abroad route for international students to study undergraduate degree programmes in western institutions

through partnerships between the institutions in their home country and the institutions in the receiving country. Twinning and articulation (also known as 2+2 or 2+1 programmes) appear to be the two most attractive options among the Chinese students who are planning to study in the UK (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). A twinning programme provides the opportunity for Chinese students to study part of a UK undergraduate degree in a home institution in China first and continue their studies in the UK institution to finish the degree (Hou, 2011; Ellett, 2019).

An articulation programme allows Chinese students to transfer their academic credits earned through the programme (such as an HND programme or an equivalent) they have studied in their home institution and top them up to gain an undergraduate degree in a UK institution (Hou, 2011). Depending on the length of the programme offered in their home institution (two-year or three-year), Chinese students on this route normally study either two years or one-year in the UK. The latter is also known as top-up programmes. As the title indicates, this study focuses only on Chinese students studying top-up programmes in the UK. The details in relation to top-up programmes are provided in the section below (section 3.2.2).

Articulation programmes (such as top-up programmes) have become increasingly popular between Chinese and UK institutions, since they help boost the financial incomes of these institutions (HEFCE, 2014). This particular type of transnational pathway is also welcomed by Chinese students and families, as it provides the opportunity for Chinese students to experience the higher education systems in China and the UK, and enjoy a study abroad experience at a lower cost compared with studying an entire undergraduate degree abroad (HEFCE, 2014; Zheng, 2014; HEFCE, 2015). Another perceived benefit, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is the option to avoid going through the national entry exam (Zheng, 2014).

However, unlike other transnational partnerships, such as joint programmes, the UK institutions on articulation agreements don't tend to provide teaching in China

at all (British Council, 2017). As long as these Chinese students reach the agreed credits through their programme in China, they can transfer to study in the UK. In other words, Chinese institutions are likely to be solely responsible for curricula design, teaching and learning and related activities. In this situation, a lack of sufficient communications can be one of the key problems of articulation agreements. Consequently, there will be a gap between what UK institutions perceive to be the help that Chinese students need and what these students truly need in order to settle in the new learning and teaching environment.

In addition, the quality of student intake of articulation programmes is likely to be lower than those who are admitted to study in a Chinese institution via the National College Entry Exams (zheng, 2014). In other words, these students are likely to be less academically gifted than the state planned students.

This is because articulation agreements and partnerships don't need to be approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE). Therefore, any Chinese institutions or colleges can run articulation programmes, and recruit whoever wants to study abroad, as long as these students are able to pay the fees, which can be much more expensive than the state university degrees. As a consequence, articulation programmes are commonly treated as "cash cows" by the providers in China (QAA, 2017). For instance, the annual course fees for Peking University is between ¥ 5,000 to 5,300 yuan, however, the annual course fees for an HND programme offered at Renmin University is ¥ 63,000 yuan (2018-19bPeking university tuition fees, 2018; Renmin University, 2019).

### 3.2.2 top-up programmes

In UK higher education, a top-up programme is also called a top-up degree or top-up course. It offers the opportunity for students who have completed a UK Higher National Diploma (HND), a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) diploma, or an equivalent qualification to enter directly onto the final year of an undergraduate programme in a UK institution. After completing this one-year full time programme successfully, students will gain a bachelor's degree

(Barber & Breeze, 2015). Apart from transnational students, top-up programmes are also popular with home students who have studied one of the diplomas or certificates mentioned above in an FE college in Britain (Vince, 2014).

### 3.2.3 Chinese top-up students

In this study, the term “Chinese top-up students” refer to those who have studied a three-year programme in China and gained either a SQA/BTEC HND, an equivalent qualification or agreed number of credits in an Chinese institution and then transfer to study directly onto the final year of an undergraduate programme in a partner institution in Britain to achieve an undergraduate degree. Most Chinese top-up students are recruited by UK institutions with middle and low average tariff scores (HEFCE, 2015). Data provided by HEFCE (2015) also suggests that the majority of Chinese top-up students tend to choose to stay in Britain for another year to study a graduate degree after completing their top-up programme.

### 3.2.4 Features of Chinese top-up students

Current research suggests that Chinese top-up students share some similarities with home top-up students. Academically, for example, home top-up students often find it very challenging to cope with the more advanced level of academic study. This is because there are some major differences between an FE college and university, such as learning and teaching style, tutor support, and academic assessments. In addition, home top-up students often lack the ability to sustain themselves in this more demanding environment, in terms of time management, learning independently and handling pressure (Barron & D’Annunzio-Green, 2009).

Some home top-up students have a part time job or have family commitments, such as caring or parenting. These students also find it hard to keep a study-work balance, or study-family life balance, due to the increased pressure of degree level study (Morgan, 2015). Furthermore, many home top-up students feel that it

is tricky for them to bond with the existing student population, which is normally much bigger and more diverse than the college from which they originated (Barron & D'Annunzio-Green, 2009; Barber & Breeze, 2015).

In addition to those mentioned above, Chinese top-up students experience the following challenges, which are unique to this particular group of international students. For example, they only have a very short period of time to adjust to the new academic and living environment, and to get used to a new culture and new language simultaneously. In spite of the fact that many of them gained a SQA/BTEC HND qualification in China, and its teaching and assessment claimed to have followed the UK style, there isn't much evidence to prove that this study experience has helped these top-up students settle in the new learning environment more effectively (Burnapp & Zhao, 2011; HND Guide for Parents and Students, n.d.). As a result, Chinese top-up students almost certainly experience a much steeper learning curve and more personal challenges than home based top-up students. Subsequently their personal experiences may change significantly through this one-year study.

### 3.3 The main personal challenges of Chinese international students identified in current literature

Since 2000, Chinese students have remained the largest proportion of all international students worldwide (New Zealand Education, 2013; Ministry of Education of the Republic of China, 2018). For this reason, Chinese students studying abroad has become a popular research topic in the higher education field, and has generated a large body of literature. To date, the personal challenges Chinese students face in the host country can be grouped into four main areas: cultural barriers, language proficiency, academic challenges and social adjustment (Fritz et al 2008; Gu et al., 2010; Ching et al., 2017).

### 3.3.1 Cultural barriers

Research has shown that it is normally much harder for Chinese students to integrate with the local western cultures, and fit into the new societies, compared with western international students (Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Wang & Hannes, 2014; Li & Zizzi, 2017). For the majority of Chinese students, studying abroad is the first time that they have a proper contact with western culture and customs. Many aspects, such as food and eating habits, queuing habits, and drinking culture, are significantly different between the East and West (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Newsome & Cooper, 2016).

Consequently, many Chinese students tend to suffer culture shock, the negative impact of cultural differences on their daily life and studies, after the initial excitement of being in a new environment is fading away. As discussed below, their lack of adequate language skills and the ability to socialize with the locals have often worsened the situation. As a result, Chinese students regularly feel socially isolated (Yu & Wright, 2016; Will, 2016). The Cultural shock phenomenon is explored further in the next chapter, but its connection to other challenges Chinese students face abroad is examined and explained in the sections below.

### 3.3.2 Language deficiency

It has been found out that Chinese international students often don't possess adequate language ability, and that many are particularly weak in listening and speaking skills (Li & Li, 2009; Fang, 2015). Despite the fact that they have to pass the International English Languages Testing Systems (IELTS) exam beforehand, Chinese students tend to pay little attention to the use of the language for communication. Therefore, some of them may have achieved a good IELTS score, but actually have lower language abilities, and are unable to cope with academic demand and pressure effectively (Edwards & Ran, 2006; Ushioda & Harsch, 2011; Hu, 2012).

The language deficiency of Chinese students creates barriers for learning, living

and interpersonal communications in the host country and potentially undermine the confidence of these students. For instance, many Chinese students spend most of their time in class trying to understand what is going on. They are reluctant to participate in group activities, answer or ask questions (Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006; Yuan 2011; Gebhard, 2012). The main causes of their language deficiency, and the proposed adequate preparation at the personal and institutional levels are provided below in sections 3.6.1 and 3.6.2.

### 3.3.3 Academic challenges

Academic challenges relating to Chinese students are interlinked closely with cultural barriers and language issues, and can be summarized into the following three areas: academic culture, academic writing skills (including critical thinking and problem solving skills), and the independent learning skills (Giridharan & Robson, 2011; Cheung, 2013; Tan, 2017).

Chinese students face challenges of adjusting to a very different learning and teaching environment, and are often described as passive learners (Chuah, 2010; Sit, 2013). This is because the Chinese education system (from primary to higher education) is predominantly exam driven. Students are used to following tutors' instructions, and memorizing answers without truly understanding them. However, in Britain Chinese students may have to get used to small class sizes (15-20) on some modules, and more student-centred teaching approaches, such as seminars and tutorials, which most Chinese students have little experience with (Gu & Maley, 2008; Wu, 2015). Consequently, these Chinese students normally aren't aware of the difficulties and challenges they are going to experience in Britain in future beforehand.

The tutor-student relationship between the Chinese and the western systems is also very different. For instance, there appears to be a more direct relationship in the Chinese environment, since students have the habit of receiving clear orders and answers from tutors. However, in the West, tutors act more like facilitators. They provide help and support in developing practical skills students need for



further study and future jobs (Rutkauksiene et al., 2010). In this respect, the relationship appears to be looser, and Chinese students sometimes consider tutors in western universities uncaring and unsupportive (Edwards & Ran, 2006; Wang, 2018).

The challenges Chinese top-up students encounter in contrast are much greater, since other international students have opportunities to get to know and get used to the British system gradually in year one and two, but Chinese top-up students aren't given a sufficient amount of time to do so when they join an undergraduate programme in the final year.

Chinese students are also more familiar with short answer exam questions, which are commonly seen in traditional Chinese exams (Gu, 2014). In contrast, a primary purpose of the education system in the West is to foster students' creativity, ability to learn independently and problem-solving skills. As Gibbs (2010: 14) remarks that "probably the only way to learn how to solve problems is to solve lots of problems". The written work of the final year students particularly needs to be critical and coherent, meaning that they are expected to demonstrate their in-depth understanding of the subject discipline by producing their own evidence-based arguments (Clughen & Hardy, 2012).

The majority of university students in the UK, including home and international students, face the challenges in terms of writing academic assignments, especially when they just start university (Cabral & Tavares, 2002; Itua et al., 2014). However most undergraduate students have adequate time in the first two years to practice and improve their writing, so that they are fairly well prepared to work on their final year dissertation or project - the most important written work they need to produce in their three-year studies (Healey et al., 2013).

In contrast, Chinese top-up students are required to learn to write in English, but more importantly, improve their writing skills significantly to fulfil the higher expectations of level 6 in a very short period of time (Catterall & Ireland, 2010). The key problems they experience in academic writing are listed as follows. Firstly, many published research articles have identified plagiarism as a main

problem relating to Chinese students' written work (Tian & Low, 2011; Hu & Lei, 2012; Howard et al., 2016). In western universities, copying ideas and taking content directly from resources without giving credits is considered plagiarism - a type of cheating, and the consequences can be severe (Farhang, 2014). Nevertheless, most Chinese students are unaware of the situation and don't realise that taking other people's work and using it as their own is wrong (Divan et al., 2015). And secondly, Chinese students often find it hard to understand assignment briefs and marking criteria, and also how to make effective use of tutors' formative and summative feedback (Marginson & Sawir, 2011; Hu et al., 2016). Consequently, it becomes more challenging for them to understand tutors' expectations, as well as to gain sufficient help and support in this area.

Independent learning is considered one of the most important skills that university students, including international students, need to possess when studying in a UK institution (Northedge, 2005; Cottrell, 2013). Compared with year one and two students, the expectations of independent learning for final year undergraduate students are much higher, since they are required to produce their dissertation or project. Academic supervisors do provide guidance and support, but students are given more autonomy to decide on their research topic and content, and manage their writing and research time (Healey et al., 2013). According to Loh and Teo (2017), to western universities, Chinese students are well known for lacking independent learning skills. When they study in China, these students are taught predominantly in a teacher-centred teaching environment. They don't have control over their learning activities, and are more used to taking orders and following tutors' instructions.

### 3.3.4 Social adjustment

Chinese students are also well known for isolating themselves when studying abroad. The term "Chinese phantom" was created specifically to describe the phenomenon of social isolation among Chinese and other East Asian students (Ngow, 2013). These students are described as "phantoms" mainly because they mostly socialise with fellow students of the same nationality and rarely have any

social interactions with the students of other nationalities, including the home students (Williams & Johnson, 2011; Ngow, 2013; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Wu, 2014).

Nevertheless, research shows that many Chinese international students actually intend to make friends with home students when they first arrive in their host country. This is because they are eager to improve their English-speaking skills and get to know the new culture and customs (Rawlings & Sue, 2013). However, as mentioned above, because of the significant cultural differences between the East and West, these students don't normally manage to develop sufficient language skills before leaving China, and most of them come to realise that it is much harder to communicate effectively with home students and other international students than they expected (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Wu, 2014; Schartner, 2015).

In addition to the problems on the Chinese student side, there seems to be issues at the home student side, which also prevents Chinese students from integrating successfully into the new community. Many home students across the world hold stereotypical views about international students, which they may have gained through different media resources. For example, they consider that international students are very wealthy, or want to live in the host country permanently to take advantage of welfare, such as health care (Gil, 2014; British Council, 2014 b). In addition, some believe that Chinese students are "passive" and "needy" (Heng, 2018:22). Consequently, some home students tend to be friendly on the surface, but keep a polite distance from Chinese students (Yuan, 2011; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017).

In this respect, even though most home students, for instance, in Britain, welcome international students, a good proportion of them prefer to have minimum interactions with international students. A survey conducted by the British Council on the integration of international students in the UK (2014) shows that among the British students who responded to the survey, only 44% of them have international students as their friends. 27% of them either don't know any

international students at all or aren't interested in making friends with them.

### 3.4 Chinese students' pre-departure preparations

The academic and social challenges mentioned above are acknowledged by many host country institutions in the West. Support is provided to international students after they arrive on campus to help them adjust to the new learning and living environment, and improve their language skills (Lee, 2010; Zhang, 2011; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Wang & Hannes, 2014; Newsome & Cooper, 2016). However, little attention has been paid to the pre-departure preparations of Chinese top-up students at the personal and institutional levels (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Providing adequate pre-departure preparations is highly important to Chinese top-up students. This is because due to the nature of top-up programmes, as mentioned above, Chinese top-up students need to adjust to the new surroundings quickly, but more importantly they are expected to improve their academic skills significantly in a very short period of time. In this respect, there are questions to be asked about whether and to what extent Chinese top-up students have developed the knowledge and skills they need to cope with the future academic and non-academic challenges before leaving China, and whether and how their home institution and the receiving institution have provided support for them to do so.

In this research the "adequate preparations" at the personal level are defined as the knowledge and information the Chinese top-up students need to possess, and the skills they should have developed academically and socially before travelling to the UK. At the institutional level, the "adequate preparations" refer to the advice, facts, and/or provision of support provided by the home and/or UK institution to the Chinese top-up students.

Based on the challenges identified above (section 3.3), the proposed adequate academic and social preparations at the personal and institutional levels are listed in the table below (see the section below for further details). They are used at the main criteria to assess the actual academic and social preparations of the

participants of this research at the personal and institutional levels. The findings are presented in chapter seven.

Area	Criteria
<b>Academic preparations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Language skills</li> <li>● Academic culture</li> <li>● Academic writing</li> <li>● Independent learning skills</li> </ul>
<b>Social preparations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Language skills</li> <li>● Social interactions</li> <li>● Cultural integration</li> </ul>

Table 3.1 A list of the criteria for assessing the pre-departure preparations of the participants

## 3.5 The proposed adequate preparations

### 3.5.1 Language skills - at the personal level

Benzie (2010) considers that the goal for language preparation should be to use English appropriately for multiple purposes in different cultural contexts and suggests that the preparations should be in the following areas. Firstly, Chinese top-up students should have possessed a sufficient level of English vocabulary. Research shows the higher the vocabulary level university students have, the better results they will achieve in their academic assignments and exams (Zhang, 2009; Milton & Treffers-Daller, 2013; Trenkic et al., 2019). The recommended minimum vocabulary size for international students to study an undergraduate degree in an English-speaking institution is around 8,900 to 9,000-word families (Ahmad et al., 2016).

Secondly, Chinese top-up students should also have developed their ability in the areas such as understanding the common forms of British slang and idioms and should have become familiar with the British average speaking speed, as well as the local accents (Wang & Gao, 2015; Gao, 2017). This is mainly because a lack

of knowledge and understanding in these areas is identified in the literature as the main barrier for Chinese students to maintain conversations, and keep up with the tutors in class (Marginson & Sawir, 2011; Park et al., 2017; Yan, 2017).

And finally, Chinese top-up students should have improved their reading comprehension and the silent reading speed. Rapid reading is an important skill that university students should possess, and is crucial for academic writing (He, 2014). Currently there is a big gap between Chinese and home students in this aspect (Hiebert et al., 2012). For example, the recommended silent reading speed for university students is around 280 words per minute (wpm) (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). The Chinese University curriculum requirement for silent reading speed in English is around 100 wpm (He, 2014).

### 3.5.2 Language skills - at the institutional level

In order to provide the adequate pre-arrival preparations at the institutional level to the participants, it is important for the home and the UK institutions to work together to create an authentic immersive language environment for Chinese top-up students to learn and practice their language skills through interactions. The teaching therefore should be focusing on helping these students develop the skills and abilities they needed to communicate freely using English, and the dominant language should be English. This means that the classroom setting must be English friendly (class decorations, and notes are all in English), and Chinese top-up students, inside and outside the classroom, should be encouraged to communicate with each other, and with tutors entirely in English (Wolff, 2010; Xiao, 2016).

There are a number of benefits to the providing of such language environment to Chinese top-up students. Firstly, it will help them learn and understand English grammar better through speaking and using the language. Traditionally Chinese teachers tend to teach English grammar rules in Chinese and through rote memorization, so students don't have the opportunity to practice and apply what they learn in real life context (Tubbs, 2016). Secondly, many EFL tutors believe

the acquisition of speaking and listening skills is considered harder and more complicated than the reading and writing skills, especially when learning a second language without being in the real language environment (Nombre, 2013; Xiao, 2016). By communicating entirely in English, Chinese top-up students would be able to learn the language in a more authentic way, and improve their speaking and listening skills significantly. This in turn should help and enhance the development of their reading and writing skills.

In order to help these students get familiar with the British accent, speaking speed and teaching style, tutors from the UK institution should have either provided some lecture podcasts or come to the home institution to deliver some sample lectures and seminars face to face to the participants. The language teaching and practice should also emphasize developing and enriching the subject discipline vocabulary of the participants. This preparation is aimed specifically for helping Chinese top-up students cope with their future top-up programme more efficiently. As a result, they would be able to “communicate freely about the general matters related to these subjects” (Xiao, 2016:237).

### 3.5.3 Academic preparations - at the personal level

#### 3.5.3.1 Academic culture

The key areas of proposed adequate preparations at the personal level should cover the following areas. Firstly, before travelling, Chinese top-up students should have understood the educational context and focus in Britain. For example, for British students, being admitted to study in university is only the start of another important and challenging journey in their life. They need to continue working hard through the three years and aim to achieve satisfactory academic results, whether they are to look for a job after graduation, or to pursue a postgraduate degree (Coughlan, 2010).

The situation in China is very different. The Chinese College Entry Exams are very tough and highly challenging (Gu et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2018), however, in

contrast, it seems to be much easier to graduate from a Chinese university. Besides, it appears that Chinese employers don't tend to look at the graduates' results, but focus on the name and the reputation of the University (Feng, 2008; Swain, 2014).

Chinese top-up students should also have developed a basic understanding of the British higher education degree structure and academic credits. For example, the length of an undergraduate degree in China is four years, but three years in Britain. Similarly, the length of a master's degree in China is two to three years, but only one-year in Britain (EP-Nuffic, 2015). Additionally, the British higher education sector has a national credit framework whilst China doesn't. In this respect, it will be helpful if Chinese top-up students come to understand the meaning of academic credits in Britain, and have a fair idea about the required credits for each module they were about to study in the top-up year, and the credit patterns for their top-up degree (Education system in the UK, 2012; QAA, 2013).

In addition, these students should have developed an understanding of British grading system beforehand, as there are no degree classifications in China. Meanwhile, Chinese universities tend to grade students on a 100-point grading system, and the passing grade is 60 (Swain, 2014; EP-Nuffic, 2015). However British undergraduate Honours degrees are graded following a degree classification system, and the passing grade is 40, even though it also uses a 100-point grading system (Ellett, 2019).

### 3.5.3.2 Academic writing

Chinese top-up students should have had a fair knowledge about what needs to be involved in preparing and writing academic assignments. This may include areas such as the type of assignments that are commonly used in Britain, the different writing styles, and how to structure and compose an assignment (Murray, 2008; Day, 2013).



These students should also have a good level of knowledge and understanding about the importance of academic referencing, and how to reference the academic resources, such as ideas, words, illustrations, and images used in their own assignment (Osmond, 2015). As suggested, developing note making skills in advance could also help the participants avoid plagiarism. Note making refers to one's ability to analyse and synthesize the sources read and produce arguments in his or her own words (Bailey, 2017).

### 3.5.3.2 Independent learning skills

In order to become an independent learner, Chinese top-up students should be self motivated to study and stay focused. There are two types of motivation - intrinsic and extrinsic (Reiss, 2012). The former means that the individuals are genuinely interested in studies, because the learning process is enjoyable and satisfying. The latter however means the actions or behaviours are mainly driven by external rewards, such as meeting their parents' expectations. It is suggested that successful independent learners tend to be more intrinsically motivated (Lai, 2011). In addition, it is very important for the participants to develop into a habit of taking a proactive approach so that they could cope with the academic difficulties and challenges better.

Meanwhile, developing time management skills is also crucial for cultivating students' independent learning abilities. In order to "feel in control of time" (Harvey & Chickie-Wolfe, 2007: 126), Chinese top-up students should have developed a successful habit of "setting and prioritizing tasks, planning and scheduling" and being organized (Harvey & Chickie-Wolfe, 2007: 126).

### 3.5.4 Academic preparations - at the institutional level

In order to help Chinese top-up students become a truly competent user of English, and develop the skills mentioned above (see sections 3.5.1 and 3.5.3), the home and UK institution should have worked collaboratively, so that the home institution would know clearly the expectations and requirements of the UK

institution, and the UK institution would gain a better understanding of the real language abilities of the participants. As a result, both institutions could plan and deliver a much more appropriate teaching and training curriculum together for the participants.

#### 3.5.4.1 Academic culture

The pre-departure preparations in this area should be provided by the UK institution (Zheng, 2014; QAA, 2015). One of the key areas that needs to be covered is the enrolment guide. Chinese top-up students should be notified about the documents they would need to bring to the UK in order to complete the enrolment process. In addition, they should be provided with the details about their chosen top-up programme, such as the programme and module specifications, learning and teaching methods, and the available learning facilities and resources on campus, in particular, the learning support dedicated to Chinese top-up students (QAA, 2015).

Furthermore, the UK institution should have offered the information about the assessment strategy and methods used in this UK institution, including marking criteria and schemes. And finally, Chinese top-up students should have a general idea about understanding tutors' expectations and how would they be expected to be involved in class activities (Safipour et al., 2017).

#### 3.5.4.2 Academic writing

The UK institution should firstly have gained a good level of knowledge about the previous writing experiences of Chinese top-up students, their worries, expectations and their actual writing abilities in English. Secondly, the Institution should have provided basic information and guidance about academic writing, including the common types of academic writing they would encounter, the format and the structure of academic assignments and the key features of academic writing (Bailey, 2017). Thirdly, it should also have provided tutors' expectations

about the writing standard and the quality of content to Chinese top-up students explicitly.

And finally, a small number of pre-departure assignments should be set up for Chinese top-up students to complete. Research has shown that the writing skills of international students can be improved significantly through regular practice (Zhang, 2011; Bailey, 2017). The crucial point, however, is that tutors need to provide qualitative feedback which not only point out the errors these students have made, but more importantly how to avoid them and improve in the future (Chokwe, 2015).

#### 3.5.4.3 Independent learning skills

In order to help and support Chinese top-up students to become independent learners, the home and the UK institution should have provided the opportunities and created an appropriate environment to facilitate them to transfer gradually from a teacher-centred teaching environment to a more learner centred learning environment (Dole et al., 2016). In the classroom teaching, tutors in their home institution may adopt an inquiry-based approach to guide the students to get used to asking questions and investigating answers or solutions themselves (Spronken-Smith, 2012; Abdi, 2014).

Additionally, tutors should have offered some autonomy for Chinese top-up students, and should have allowed them to make choices on “ what, how and with whom they will learn” (Wilson & Murdoch, 2006:1). Through offering formative or peer assessed informal feedback, Chinese top-up students would then be encouraged to set goals, make plans for their own learning activities, also self monitor and self support their own learning process and effectiveness (Harrison et al., 2016; Kay et al., 2018).

### 3.5.5 Social preparations - at the personal level

Culture learning and social identification are intertwined with each other. Having a good level of knowledge about the new culture will help individuals not only integrate and immerse into the new culture, but also establish social connections quicker in the new environment. Additionally, the interactions with their new local friends will help these individuals become part of local communities, and also understand the local culture and norms better. For these reasons, the adequate preparations of both criteria are merged together in this section.

In order to have a swifter transition process, Chinese top-up students should have developed their cultural awareness by learning as much as they could about the British culture and customs in advance. Before departure, they should also be aware of the difficulties and challenges international students currently face in the aspect of cross-cultural adjustment. Therefore, they would have a better idea of what to expect realistically, but more importantly, they would be able to plan and develop some positive coping strategies in advance.

In addition, Chinese top-up students should have made some plans about how to meet new people and make new local friends in Britain. But more importantly, they need to be prepared and be willing to take the first step in making friends with the host nationals. This is mainly due to the fact that the existing students already have their own circle of friends, hence, may be less interested in making friends with international students at this stage of their studies.

### 3.5.6. Social preparations - at the institutional level

At the institutional level, the focus should be on helping Chinese top-up students become familiar with the new cultural environment. Opportunities should be created to encourage and assist these students to start friendships with the host nationals even before their departure.

Research has shown that oriental programmes have helped international students integrate with the home students and the local communities after they arrive in the host country (Hughes et al., 2016). However, as the duration of a top-up programme is only one-year, the UK institution, in order to help Chinese top-up students settle in quicker and better in the UK, may consider offering the orientation programme to these students before their departure to Britain. This oriental programme may be online based and may cover the following areas, such as the British culture and customs; the concept of culture shock, and the suggestions and tips for building and developing friendships with the home students (Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Wang & Hannes, 2014).

Additionally, the programme should have offered information about the support mechanisms the UK institution has put in position for Chinese top-up students, since international students aren't familiar with the University structure and organization, therefore often don't know where to go and who to turn to when they need help and support (Baba & Hosoda, 2014).

Furthermore, the UK institution should have created the opportunity to help Chinese top-up students form some initial social contacts with the host nationals while they were still in their home institution. This type of connection may be established by using social media or other web based instant messaging tools (Madge et al., 2009; Young-Powell, 2014; Taha & Cox, 2016). Through the online communication, these students could manage to get to know some students of the existing cohort, or their future flatmates or housemates in Britain.

### 3.6 Summary

This chapter primarily addressed the second sub question of this study - *what does current literature identify regarding personal challenges for Chinese international students?* It started with presenting definitions of some key terms used in this study, such as transnational pathways, top-up degrees and Chinese top-up students.

The first part of the main body of this chapter focused on some of the major challenges Chinese students experience when studying abroad, as identified in current literature, such as language proficiency, academic challenges and social adjustment. Language proficiency is a common issue among the Chinese international students, partially because the focus of English language teaching in China is not on developing students' ability to use the language properly in practical situations. Due to the cultural differences between China and Britain, Chinese students also struggle to understand the slang and idioms in English.

Academic challenges that Chinese students encounter are categorized into three areas: academic culture, academic writing skills (including critical thinking and problem-solving skills), and independent learning skills. For example, Chinese higher education system is very different from the British education system, and Chinese students hardly have the opportunity to have a direct contact with the new education system or practice academic writing before leaving China. Academic assignments are however commonly used in British universities and designed to cultivate and evaluate students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Independent learning skills are essential in a more learner centred environment. However, Chinese students don't normally possess these skills as they are more familiar with a teacher-centred environment. The difficulty in social integration is another big challenge Chinese students face. Chinese students are well known for isolating themselves, and socializing mainly with fellow Chinese students.

The second part of the main body of this chapter emphasized the proposed adequate pre-departure preparations of the participants at the personal and institutional levels. They are developed upon the problems and challenges mentioned above, and are categorized into academic and social preparations. Language skills seem to be a critical and essential element as it is interlinked closely to both the academic and social preparations.

The academic preparations focused on three areas: academic culture, academic writing and independent learning skills. The social preparations focused on two

areas: social interactions and culture integration. These two areas are also connected closely to each other, because understanding the new local culture can help build new social relationships with host nationals, and new friendships will help Chinese students gain a better understanding of the host culture.

The next chapter is the final part of literature review, and will focus on the U curve model, one of the main theoretical foundations adopted in this research. Understanding the U curve is important to this thesis as it is used to explore the transition process of the participants, and also to gain a deep understanding of both their academic and social experiences during this one-year study abroad journey.

# Chapter Four: The Chinese top-up students' transition and the U curve model

## 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter described the personal challenges Chinese students commonly faced when they were studying and living abroad, as identified in the literature. They were cultural barriers, language proficiency, academic challenges and social adjustment. This chapter is the final part of the literature review, and answers the sub question - *what is the most appropriate theoretical understanding of the issue of transition to use in this thesis?*

As described in chapter one, the main research question of this research is “*how do the perceptions of Chinese top-up students change as they are transitioning through a regional UK university?*” The intention is to gain a good understanding of the individual transition experiences of this special group of international students throughout their one-year study in Britain. In order to do so, it is important to adopt an appropriate transition model as the theoretical foundation to inform and structure this research.

Since international student transition is a popular research topic, many transition models, such as the U curve model (Lysgaard, 1955), the cross cultural adaptation process model (Yoshikawa, 1988), the transitional experience model (Adler, 1975), the process of accumulation model (Berry, 1997), and the ABC of acculturation model (Ward et al., 2005) have been developed to study international students' transition experiences from different perspectives, such as stress and coping, culture learning and social identification.

The stress and coping models tend to consider a cross-cultural transition as a negative and stressful process since individuals have to continuously deal with



various problems and difficulties (Zhou et al., 2008; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). The culture learning models advocate that individuals need to learn and possess some fundamental cross-cultural skills to be able to adjust to the new environment properly and effectively (Berry, 2005; Brunsting et al., 2018). The social identification models explore mainly the cultural identity of individuals in relation to their home culture and the new culture during a cross-cultural transition (Berry, 1997).

This chapter will explain why the chosen theoretical foundation for this research is the U curve model, one of the earliest, and also one of the most well-known transition models in the literature. The U curve model was proposed by Lysgaard (1955) and developed further by Oberg (1960). Since it was created, the U curve model has been adopted by many different research studies to examine the transition experiences of international students (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Chen & Yang, 2015; Ran & Shiao-Yun, 2015; Meghani & Harvey, 2016; Duran & Thach, 2018). It is felt more suitable than other transition models for this research mainly because of the following reasons. Firstly, the U curve model provides a good description of a possible transition process, as it illustrates 4 stages that individuals may experience when they go through their cross-cultural transition. They are: the honeymoon, the crisis, the recovery and the re-adjustment stage.

Secondly, and most importantly, even though the U curve model is often categorized as a stress and coping transition model, it can be used to encompass all three perspectives (stress and coping, culture learning and social identification) identified in current literature, better than other transition models. In this respect, the U curve model is considered to be the most appropriate theoretical framework to apply to this study, since this research aims to obtain a comprehensive view of the Chinese top-up students' transition experiences, rather than to follow any particular perspective or test any pre-defined factors.

And finally, the U curve model focuses on not only the social adjustment, but also the academic adjustment of the individuals, and indicates clearly that both adjustments are interlinked closely to each other. In contrast, other transition

models have largely overlooked the academic adjustment, and have emphasized mainly the psychological and social adjustment of the individuals (Berry, 1997; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999; Berry, 2005; Brunsting et al., 2018). In common with Lysgaard's work, this research intends to explore the academic and social development of the target research group.

The U curve model in this research is used to design and frame the principal interview questions asked at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages. It also provides a systematic framework within which the transition experiences of the Chinese top-up students can be presented and analysed (see chapter seven, eight and nine for further details). For example, the findings chapters of this research demonstrate to the reader whether and to what extent the transition experiences of these students at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages followed the U curve model.

Additionally, the use of the U curve model helps explain the transition experiences of these students from the following three aspects: firstly, the difficulties and challenges the Chinese top-up students experienced academically and socially in this year; secondly, whether and to what extent the Chinese top-up students developed the cross cultural skills they needed to function effectively in this UK institution before their departure from China and after arrival in the UK, and its impact on their academic and social development; and finally, how these students positioned themselves in this new cultural environment, that is, whether they managed to become part of a local community in this year.

This chapter comprises two sections. The first section explains the differences between transitioning into and transitioning through, since the focus of this research isn't on the first year experiences of international students when they just start their degree programme in a UK institution, but the experiences of the Chinese top-up students all the way through their entire top-up programme.

The second section focuses on the U curve model, and contains four subsections. Subsection one explores the main transition models in existing literature. Subsection two offers an overview of the U curve model. Subsection

three provides justifications on why the U curve model is felt more appropriate than other transition models for this research. Subsection four explores the criticisms the U curve model receives, and the strategies this research has adopted to improve the effectiveness of the model.

## 4.2 Transitioning into versus transitioning through the UK higher education

Transition is often viewed as a long, complex process of continuous change. It happens when individuals move from the familiar to a new situation or environment (Kralik et al., 2006; Meleis, 2010; Cheng et al., 2015). One may go through many different transitions in life, such as getting married, getting a new job or moving into a new house. This research focuses only on study abroad transition, as it aims to explore *“how do the perceptions of Chinese top-up students change as they are transitioning through a regional UK university?”*

Even though there is a large body of literature on transition issues with respect to Chinese undergraduate international students (Mao & Liu, 2016; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Quan et al., 2016; Alsaifi & Shin, 2017), the majority of studies in this area focus on these students' first year experiences, that is, their transition into higher education abroad (McEwan, 2015; Goddard, 2017). However, there are increasingly more longitudinal studies exploring how Chinese and other East Asian master's students are transitioning through their studies for the entirety of the process, since the duration of a UK master's degree is only a year (Zhou & Todman, 2009; Wu & Hammond, 2011; Quan et al., 2016).

The length of a top-up and master's programme is the same. However, the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students may be very different from that of Chinese master's students. This is partially due to the fact that many Chinese postgraduate entrants have already had UK university experiences as they have studied their first degree in Britain (HEFCE, 2015). For those masters students who may not have prior UK study experiences, many tend to be older and more mature than top-up students, as the duration of a normal undergraduate study in

China is four years, whilst the duration of an SQA HND or an equivalent international programme in China is three years (EP-Nuffic, 2015). Besides, some Chinese top-up students choose to skip their final year of upper secondary school study and the gaokao (the National College Entry Exam in China) altogether, and instead start an HND or an international programme a year earlier than others (Yiqian, 2016).

Those beginning top-up programmes are joining an existing student cohort, therefore, need to make more effort in their studies and also need to establish social relationships with existing students. In contrast, masters students don't face the same level of challenges, because everyone on the programme is a newcomer, no matter whether he or she is an international or home student.

For the reasons mentioned above, a research gap is therefore identified to explore specifically the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students.

## 4.3 The U curve model - the theoretical foundation for this research

### 4.3.1 An overview of the main transition models in the literature

Studying abroad is commonly considered a major transition that virtually all international students experience in their life, since there are many distinct differences between their home country and the host country, relating to culture, customs, living and study environment (Wu et al., 2015). Consequently, international students often experience many difficulties and challenges when they go through this particular transition. Many student transition and adjustment models have been developed with the intention of understanding the transition experiences of international students, and subsequently provide recommendations for the host institutions, policy makers, and academic tutors to help these students settle in the new environment better (Zhou et al., 2008;

Cheng et al., 2015). These transition models can be largely categorized into three groups: stress and coping, culture learning and social identification.

The stress and coping models, such as the cross-cultural adaptation process model (Yoshikawa, 1988) and the intercultural adjustment model (Rhinesmith, 1985), are mainly concerned with the psychological well being of the individuals. Some models in this category, such as the intercultural adjustment model (Rhinesmith, 1985) however only give attention to the negative effects of culture shock, that is, the psychological and emotional stress caused by this cross-cultural transition. Whilst other models in this category, such as the transitional experience model (Adler, 1975), focus on the positive side of culture shock, that is, individuals have enthusiastic attitudes and take the opportunity presented positively to develop the skills needed to settle into the new culture environment (Alder, 1975).

The culture learning models, such as the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) (Ward & Searle, 1991) believe that the main reason for individuals experiencing difficulties and problems in cross cultural transition is that they don't possess the necessary verbal and/or nonverbal cross-cultural knowledge and skills, such as language competency, the ability to develop new friendships with the host nationals, and cultural awareness (Ward, 2004; Zhou et al., 2008; Yue & Li, 2012). The transition models in this category recommend providing training opportunities for the individuals in cross cultural transition to develop these essential skills needed for them to settle into the new environment.

The social identification models, such as the process of acculturation model (Berry, 1980, 1997), and the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981) focus on the cultural identity of the individuals, that is, how they relate themselves to their own ethnic group (in-groups) and other ethnic groups (out-groups) in the new cultural environment. Research has shown that those who are more willing to and have made an effort to accept the new culture and integrate into local communities normally experience less cross cultural issues and stress than those who may be reluctant to do so (Khreshnan & Berry, 1992; Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

### 4.3.2 An outline of the U curve model

Classified commonly as a stress and coping model, the U curve model is considered one of the most well known and most widely cited transition models in international student transition literature (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Meghani & Harvey, 2016; Duran & Thach, 2018). It was proposed initially by Lysgaard (1955) based on the interviews he conducted with 200 Norwegians who had lived in the U.S. for some period of time, and two important findings emerged from the data. Firstly, the interviewees went through three transition stages during their time in the U.S., namely the initial adjustment, the crisis, and the readjustment. And secondly, their transition process shared a common U-shaped pattern.

Shortly after it was created, the U curve model was expanded by Oberg (1960) from a three-stage to a four-stage transition model, namely the honeymoon, the crisis, the recovery, and the readjustment (Dutton, 2011). Because the U curve model initially overlooked the importance of cultural differences, Oberg gave particular emphasis to the impact of cultural differences on one's cross-cultural transition to a new environment.

*Honeymoon*, or the initial adjustment, is the first stage and happens as soon as the individuals arrive at the host country. They are full of enthusiasm and are fascinated about the new culture and environment. However, once these newcomers start to cope with the real situation on a daily basis, the second stage, *culture shock* or crisis begins. As shown in Figure 4.1, culture shock is probably the most difficult stage for individuals, and is defined as a type of "occupational disease" (Oberg, 1960:177). This is because the differences between the home and new culture and environment begin to affect their everyday life. As a result these individuals start feeling lonely, anxious and isolated.

The third stage is the *recovery* stage. After living in the new environment for a period of time, individuals develop a better understanding of the host culture, and the new community starts to feel more like home. As a result, individuals learn to act more appropriately according to the norms and values of the new culture in

the host country. At the final stage *re-adjustment*, individuals are truly settled in the new environment and able to function effectively in the new culture.

Even though Lysgaard and Oberg, respectively, created and re-developed the U curve model, neither of them provided a diagram for it. Subsequently, various versions of the U curve model diagram have been generated in different research studies, but they all look very similar (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Matveev, 2016). The version used in this research is presented as follows:

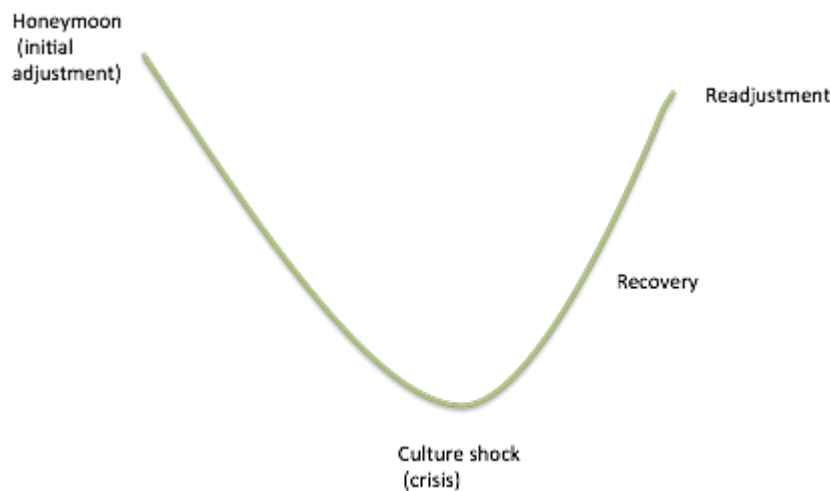


Figure 4.1 The U curve model, as represented by the author

### 4.3.3 The appropriateness of the U curve model for this research

The U curve model is considered more suitable for this research than other transition models because of three reasons: it provides a good explanation of a possible transition process; it covers the main perspectives cross cultural transition models have focused on, as identified in the existing literature; and finally, it pays attention to both the academic and social adjustment of the individuals. Each of these reasons will now be discussed in more detail.

Firstly, the U curve model provides a sufficiently detailed description of a possible transition process international students may experience when they study abroad.

This is because the model, as mentioned above, is comprised of four linear transition stages. In addition, the U curve model addresses the transition experiences of the individuals all the way through their study in the host country, and not only their “transitioning into” experience, since Lysgaard believed that “*adjustment is... a time process*”, and one of the intentions of his research was to “study the impact of time” (page 49). The interviews he conducted explored “*their original reasons for going to America, their adjustment to and satisfaction with different aspects of their situations there, their opinions on America and Americans, their readjustment on return, etc*” (page 45). This kind of description is important for this research as it intends to explore the individual experiences of a group of Chinese top-up students when they are *transitioning through* their one-year top up programme in the UK (see the section 4.2 for further details).

Secondly, the U curve model covers all three perspectives (stress and coping, culture learning and social identification, see section 4.3.1 for further details) better than other transition models in the literature, and doesn’t give a particular perspective or factors any prominence. As a result, the U curve model has helped develop the level of understanding this research aims for. For example, the stress and coping models focus mainly on the psychological and emotional adjustment of individuals. In his report, Lysgaard described the common difficulties and challenges his interviewees faced at the crisis or cultural shock stage after they had lived in the U.S. for some time, such as the academic pressure, language barriers, cultural differences, and loneliness.

Oberg (1960:143) supported the findings of Lysgaard and listed the “genuine difficulty” individuals encountered in the process of adjustment, such as “*maid trouble, school trouble, language trouble, house trouble, transportation trouble, shopping trouble*”. Both researchers also described the coping strategies that these individuals adopted to overcome these difficulties and challenges when they moved from the crisis to the recovery and the readjustment stages. Due to the fact that these strategies largely fall into the areas of culture learning and social identification, they will be discussed in detail in the section below.



Culture learning models emphasize developing the fundamental cross cultural and social skills the individuals need in a new cultural environment. Social identification models are concerned with whether the individuals feel a sense of belonging in the new environment, and how they position themselves culturally within their own ethnic group and other ethnic groups. Even though he didn't use the terms culture learning and social identification explicitly in his report, Lysgaard suggested that the interviewees who had better adjustment experiences appeared to have developed some fundamental social skills, such as making new friends, and learning to *"get more satisfaction out of social life"* (Lysgaard, 1955:51). Other coping strategies the interviewees developed included learning to accept the differences, and becoming part of a local community during their time in the U.S. These strategies seemed to have worked effectively to help the interviewees to *"overcome the adjustment, problems encountered in the 'loneliness' stage"* (page 51).

Oberg (1960) offered similar suggestions for the individuals who were experiencing cultural shock. The coping strategies he suggested involved improving their language skills, and trying to understand the basic elements of a new culture. Furthermore, he advocated that the individuals should take opportunities to develop new friendships with the locals, and make an effort to accept the differences between their home and the new host culture.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that apart from the U curve model, another well cited transition model - the ABCs of acculturation model (Ward et al., 2001) has also included all three aspects mentioned above, which were renamed by the authors as the affective, behavioural, and cognitive components of cross cultural experiences (Ward et al., 2001). However, the ABCs of acculturation model isn't considered appropriate for this research, mainly because it doesn't provide any explanation or description about the individual transition processes. In addition, this model addresses largely the social adjustment of the individuals, not their academic adjustment.

The final reason for the suitability of the U curve model for this research is that it concentrates on the academic and social transitions of the individuals. Lysgaard remarked that both transitions were connected closely to each other, that is, a successful transition in one aspect (academic or social) could have a positive impact on their transition in the other aspect. For example, in his report, Lysgaard said:

*“The data will be discussed from two points of view: the relationship between adjustment in different areas; adjustment as a process over time.... We have thus observed that adjustment within the personal-social area as well as within the professional-educational area 'is generalized' from one item to the other.....If we now relate items from the one area to items of the other, we find that strong association also exists between items from different areas”.* (page 46)

In contrast, other transition models in the literature have focused predominantly on the psychological and social transitions of the individuals, and have neglected their academic transition (Berry, 2017; Geeraert et al., 2019). This may be because many researchers perceive that the main transition issue that international students experience when they study abroad is how to survive and settle in the new cultural environment, due to language barriers, and cultural conflicts between the home and host country, in particular those between the East and the West (Rabia & Hazza, 2017).

#### 4.3.4 The main criticism the U curve model has received and the strategies adopted in this research to counteract the criticism

To date the U curve model has received a number of criticisms, and the main ones may be summarized into the following areas. Firstly, the U curve model suggests that adjustment takes time, but the research Lysgaard conducted was cross-sectional, not longitudinal in nature (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Ward et al., 1998; Ward et al., 2001; Levine & Levine, 2014). For example, the interviewees were only interviewed once, which took place after they returned home.

Secondly, the U curve model has failed to address the impact of a number of key factors on cross-cultural transitions, such as the individual differences and the surrounding contexts. Individual differences may include “age, gender, sex, cognitive ability, socioeconomic class and education” (Furnham & Bochner, 1982:171; Arthur, 2003; Ward, 2004; Berardo, 2007; Wang et al., 2012). The surrounding contexts may include the attitude of home students to international students, and the academic settings of the programme that international students are studying. Even though Lysgaard stated in his report that “*the generalization, then, seems to be due to characteristics of the person in the situation, that is, to the way in which the person does indeed adjust: to the situation*” (page 49), he provided no explanation on what kinds of characteristics he was referring to.

Thirdly, in Lysgaard’s original work, there are areas that lack a clear explanation. For instance, he didn’t explain why those who studied in the U.S. for between 6 to 18 months experienced more transition issues than those who studied for less than 6 months or more than 18 months (Church, 1982; Black & Mendenhall, 1991). In addition, the U curve model only describes the adjustment stages, it however doesn’t provide any explanation on how and why the individuals move from one stage to another (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Berardo, 2007).

And finally, the linear structure of the U curve model may be too rigid, as the individuals may not go through all transition stages suggested or individual adjustments may not necessarily follow the adjustment stages in the same order suggested (Church, 1982; Black & Mendenhall, 1991).

When adopting the U curve model, this research has used the following methods to counteract the criticisms mentioned above. First, in response to the criticism that the U curve model wasn’t developed through a longitudinal design, this research is longitudinal in nature, and it collects both longitudinal and cross-sectional data during the data collection stage. The participants - a group of Chinese top-up students were interviewed three times at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages during their studies in this UK institution (see chapter six for further details).

Secondly, with regard to the criticism that the U curve model has paid very little attention to the individual differences and the surrounding contexts of the individuals in cross cultural transition, this research, in order to develop a better understanding of individual experiences of these Chinese top-up students, specially adopted portrait methodology, because the methodology focuses precisely on individuals, their differences and their contexts. The justification for choosing portrait methodology and its benefit to this research is offered in chapter five and eleven.

In addition, during the data collection stage, this research focused on exploring all related factors that may affect the experiences and development of the Chinese top-up students, and the principal interview questions at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages were designed specifically to achieve this purpose (see appendices 3-5 for further details). Consequently, the discussions chapter examines and presents the factors that caused the problems and challenges the Chinese top-up students experienced in this one-year study, which had emerged from the interview transcripts and individual portraits. The factors are then categorized into three levels: macro (national), meso (institutional) and micro (personal) (see chapter ten for further details).

Thirdly, in order to overcome the criticism that the U curve model lacks a clear explanation in many areas, this research has adopted a number of techniques such as thick description and audit trail to offer a sufficiently detailed description of the research design and how the data were analysed (see chapter five and six for further details). In addition, the findings chapters provide a systematic analysis of the transition experiences of the Chinese top-up students at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages, and the explanation includes the following two key areas: firstly, whether and to what extent their transitions followed the U curve model; and secondly, the personal and contextual factors that contributed to or affected their progression from one transition stage to another. Furthermore, the researcher's self-reflection about the usefulness of the U curve model to this research is offered in chapter twelve.

And finally in response to the criticism that the U curve model is a rigid linear transition model, this research sets out to gain a comprehensive view of the personal experiences of the Chinese top-up students, rather than to use any stereotypes. Subsequently, a sub question is created purposely to explore “whether and to what extent does the transition experience of the Chinese top-up students follow the U curve model?” A brief summary of the criticism the U curve model has received and the strategies this research adopted to counteract these criticism is listed in the table below:

<b>The criticism the U curve received</b>	<b>The responses of this research</b>
The research Lysgaard conducted was cross-sectional, but not longitudinal in nature.	This is a longitudinal and cross-sectional study. Data were collected three times at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages in this one-year study.
The U curve model has neglected the impact of the individual differences and the contextual factors on individual adjustments.	This research aims to gain a good understanding of the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students. Therefore, the researcher explored all factors related to the transition experiences of these students, including the personal differences and the surrounding contexts. In fact, these factors appeared to have played an important role in understanding how and why individual Chinese top-up students reacted to the situation they were in at each key transition stage.
The linear structure is too rigid, individual adjustments don't necessarily follow the stages.	One of the main purposes of this research is to examine whether and to what extent the transition of Chinese top-up students followed the U curve model. It didn't pre-judge the adjustment pattern of these students.

Table 4.1 The comparison of the criticism the U curve received and the responses of this research

## 4.4 Summary

This chapter focused upon one of the main theoretical foundations of this research - the U curve model. Before exploring the U curve and justifying its

appropriateness for this research, the first section of this chapter examined the literature that has looked at the differences between “transition into” and “transition through”. This is because this research set out to investigate the personal experiences of Chinese top-up students through the whole transition process, rather than students’ first year university experience.

The second section focused on the U curve model. It offered an overview of the main transition models in the literature, including the U curve model, and explored and discussed why the U curve model was considered more appropriate for this research than other transition models in the literature. For example, this model described the transition processes of international students when they study abroad. Secondly, the U curve model covered all three aspects (stress and coping, culture learning and social identification) better than other cross-cultural models. And finally, the U curve model addressed not only the social adjustment, but also the academic adjustment of the individuals.

The final part of the chapter discussed the key criticisms the U curve model has received, and the strategies and solutions this research adopted to counteract the criticisms. For example, in order to overcome the weakness that the U curve model was developed upon the cross-sectional data only, this research was cross sectional and longitudinal in nature. In addition, in order to respond to the criticism that the U curve model didn’t acknowledge the impact of personal differences and contextual factors on the individual adjustment, this research was designed to explore all related factors, and didn’t just test the pre-defined factors identified in current literature. Furthermore, this research offered a detailed explanation in relation to the research design, and the analysis of the data collected, in order to counteract the criticism that the U curve didn’t provide a sufficient explanation in many key areas.

The next chapter will discuss the methodology and research design used in this research study - a variation of portrait methodology.

# Chapter Five: Research methodology

## 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the U curve model, one of the main theoretical foundations for this research and offered a justification on why this model was felt more appropriate for this research than other transition models.

This chapter is the methodological chapter, and partially addresses the sub question: “*what contributions does the portrait methodology make to understanding the perceptions of Chinese top-up students during their transition*”? It outlines the philosophical underpinnings of this research and provides a justification for the appropriateness of the portrait methodology - the second theoretical foundation for this study, and also how this research has met the trustworthiness criteria.

This research sets out to develop a deep understanding of a particular social phenomenon situated in a particular context: the personal experiences of a small group of Chinese top-up students during their studies of a one-year top-up programme in a UK institution. The philosophical underpinning of this research is a constructivism paradigm, because the researcher is a constructivist, and as such believes that there are multiple interpretations of single reality.

Portrait methodology is a type of qualitative research methodology, and the main purpose is to represent the individual experiences of those being researched through portraits, which are the interpretations of the researcher. Portraits are the key feature of portrait methodology, and are developed from the data collected, such as the interview transcripts.

Other methodologies were considered, but the portrait methodology is felt more suitable than alternatives, such as life history, narrative inquiry and case study. This is mainly because this research aims to understand Chinese top-up students' individual experiences during a particular period of time in their life, but

not their entire lifespan. In addition, this research doesn't intend to explore the personal experiences of these students from multiple perspectives, but only their perceived views and thoughts. In this respect, this research uses only semi-structured interviews to collect data, instead of multi-methods.

There are currently two main variations of portrait methodology: Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1983; 1997; 2005; 2016) and Bottery's (2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013; 2018), and they are different in many aspects. For example, Bottery's variation focuses on human subjects, and uses only semi-structured interviews to collect data. In addition, Bottery tends to take an outsider position in his research, and there is a clear division between the researcher's interpretations and the participants' opinions. However, Lawrence-Lightfoot's version explores both human subjects and places, and uses multiple data collection methods. Lawrence-Lightfoot also regularly takes an insider's position and interweaves her views purposely into the portraits she produces.

This research has adopted Bottery's variation. This is because the intention isn't to gain some external truth, but to investigate only the perceived views of the participants. It hence uses semi-structured interviews to collect data. In this respect, it is highly important for this research to demonstrate that it has achieved trustworthiness. Bottery's variation is able to help in this area since this variation aims to present the personal experiences of those being researched as accurately as possible. In order to do so, one of the main techniques Bottery uses is member checking, that is, sending the portraits back to the participants to check the interpretations made by the researcher.

Enhancing trustworthiness, in particular, credibility, is crucial in this research. Trustworthiness means that the research needs to demonstrate to the reader that the findings of his or her research can be trusted and is worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guion, 2002; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility refers to the fact that the findings of the research must truly represent the experiences and interests of those being researched (Lietz & Zayas, 2010).



The reason that enhancing trustworthiness is very important in this research is that the data were collected only through semi-structured interviews, and the researcher needs to show to the reader that what the participants said in the interviews is what they believed to be true to themselves at the time when they were interviewed. In this respect, it is highly important for the researcher to develop and maintain a trust relationship with the participants during the data collection process, and various strategies are adopted for this purpose, such as organizing an informal meeting with the participants before the start of the first interviews and providing a signed information document to the participants (see appendix 2 for further details).

The chapter consists of five sections. The first section provides an overview of research paradigms, and describes the philosophical belief of the researcher. In addition, it provides a justification for the use of the constructivism paradigm in this research. The second section focuses on portrait methodology, and contains five subsections. The subsection one provides an overview of portrait methodology. The subsection two explores the main differences between Lawrence-Lightfoot's and Bottery's variations. The subsection three and four provide justifications on why portrait methodology, and Bottery's variation are considered appropriate for this research. The subsection five describes the main limitations of Bottery's variation. The third and fourth sections focus on the trustworthiness of this research, and the research position of the researcher in this research. The final section emphasizes the research ethical issues.

## 5.2 Research paradigms

Research paradigms have two main primary functions. Firstly, they are used in a research study to help the researcher decide the nature of the research purpose, for example, whether it is to explore a particular social phenomenon in depth or discover the objective truth or reality of a particular inquiry through measurement (Guba & Lincoln, 1994); and secondly, research paradigms are used to help the researcher decide how the main research question and sub questions can possibly be answered (Babbie, 2015; Ling & Ling, 2016). Choosing the most

appropriate research paradigm is critical for any research studies, because it sets a basis for “subsequent choices regarding methodology, methods, literature or research design” (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006: 193).

The characteristics of a paradigm are decided by three elements: Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology (Krauss, 2005; Vasilachis, 2009). Ontology concerns the nature of reality, that is, how individuals view the world, and answers questions such as “*what is the nature of the knowable?*” (Guba, 1990: 18; Bottery & Wright, 2019). Epistemology seeks to explore how people know what they already know, that is, the knowledge and understanding individuals have developed, and answers questions such as “*what is the nature of the relationship between the knower and the known?*”(Guba, 1990: 18). Methodology refers to the principles and ideas that research methods are based on, that is, the strategy that a researcher uses to solve the research problem systematically (Guba, 1990; Holloway & Wheeler, 2002; Kothari, 2004).

As shown in the fig below, ontology, epistemology and methodology are interrelated closely with each other (Krauss, 2005). For example, ontology and epistemology together construct the philosophical basis of a research study, which then is used to guide the researcher to decide the methodological approach and data collection methods.

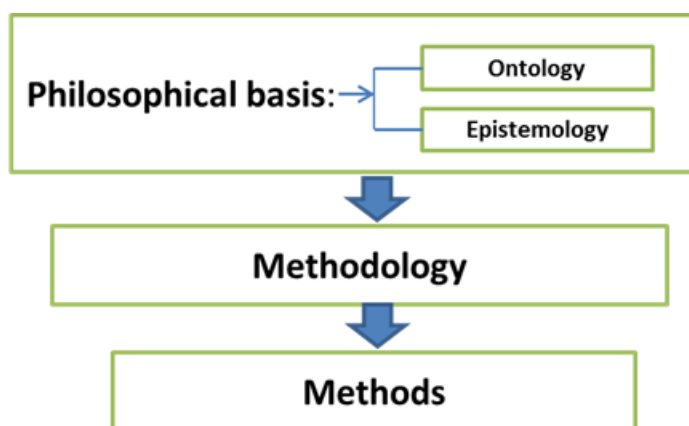


Figure 5.1 The relationships between Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology and Method

However, some scholars, such as Plowright (2011), adopt an “a-paradigmatic stance” and claim that research methodologies should be independent of research paradigms because one can’t have conflicted ontological assumptions (reality is mind independent or mind-dependent) simultaneously when conducting a research study. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, all individuals must have developed and possess their own views and opinions through life, which will indeed influence and decide the way a research study is undertaken (Flowers, 2009). Avoiding the articulation of the philosophical belief in their research doesn’t mean that the researcher doesn’t have one. Plowright’s view therefore fails to recognize that “no research is paradigm free” (Hall, 2012:2).

### 5.2.1 The choice of research paradigm for this research

The two most common research paradigms in educational research are positivism (including postpositivism) and constructivism (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Della Porta & Keating, 2008; Hennink et al., 2010). Positivism believes that all events and phenomena are independent from personal beliefs, but controlled by natural laws. Constructivism believes that all truth is relative and is constructed and impacted by social interactions. The chosen research paradigm for this research is constructivism. The decision is based on a combination of factors, such as the purpose of this research, the researcher’s philosophical belief (see section 5.2.1.1), and the characteristics of both paradigms (see sections 5.2.1.2 and 5.2.1.3).

The research question of this study is *“how do the perceptions of Chinese top-up students change when they are transitioning through a regional UK university?”* This is a social inquiry and aims to develop a rich and deep knowledge of the individual experiences of this group of students, in particular, their views and perceptions within a unique context, that is, during the one-year study of their top-up programme in a UK institution.

### 5.2.1.1 My philosophical belief as a researcher

I am a social constructivist, and believe the existence of multiple interpretations of single reality. That is, we all have our own views and understandings of the same thing or situation, which are influenced and shaped by various surrounding social contexts, such as our educational background, parents' influences, and other life experiences. In addition, our views and interpretations may change when we become older.

Subsequently, my interest is to use a suitable methodological approach to explore how individuals develop their unique views and perceptions at a particular moment in time, and gain an understanding of their behaviours in natural settings. I am eager to have direct conversations with the participants, as I believe this is the most appropriate way to gain the level of understanding I aim for.

### 5.2.1.2 Constructivism

The ontological assumption of constructivism is that reality exists subjectively, and is the product of social interactions (Costantino, 2008; Mertens, 2014). The epistemological assumption therefore is that knowledge isn't there waiting to be discovered, but is "socially constructed" (Mertens, 2014: 16). In other words, the meanings and understandings are developed through social interactions between human beings, which however may "change over time" when individuals go through life (Merriam, 2009; Joubish et al., 2011: 1).

Research rooted in constructivism hence focuses on "constantly shifting human behaviours" formed within the life contexts and is interested in making sense of individual experiences "from the perspective of people themselves" (Hennink et al., 2010:14; Houghton et al., 2013; Bastow et al., 2014:2)". In this context, a researcher often becomes the principal research tool, and uses qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups to interact directly with the participants through open-ended discussions (Curry et al., 2009).

### 5.2.1.3 Positivism and postpositivism

In contrast to constructivism, positivism is based on the ontological assumption that there is a single reality, which exists independently from the contexts. Individuals are able to obtain the objective knowledge or truth through observation and measurement (Comte, 2015). The purpose of research is to discover and understand the “underlying principle that has ‘caused’ the event to occur” (Trochim, 2006; Mukherji & Albon, 2009: 11). Research rooted in a positivism paradigm, of which postpositivism is a development, tends to adopt quantitative approaches, such as experiments, and questionnaires to collect numerical data to test, and subsequently approve or disapprove hypotheses (Tuli, 2010).

Postpositivism is considered the moderation or upgrade of positivism (Adam, 2014), and was created to allow social science researchers to conduct non-strict scientific research, with the acknowledgement and consideration of environmental and social impact (Davis & Harrison, 2013). Even though postpositivism is based on the same ontological assumption as positivism, it “accepts degree of uncertainty” and believes that reality isn’t so easy to capture, because of the impact of the surrounding contexts (Della Porta & Keating, 2008:24). Consequently, scientific discovery becomes a continuous process, and the purpose of research thus is to “hold steadfastly to the goal of getting it right about reality, even though we can never achieve that goal (Moutinho & Hutcheson, 2011: 1)”.

Based on the discussions above, constructivism is considered the most appropriate paradigm for this research. This is because the researcher isn’t interested in discovering the factual knowledge or finding the absolute truth or reality, and besides, this research involves human subjects. Since the views and behaviours of the Chinese top-up students are socially constructed, and highly contextualized, their individual perceptions cannot be measured by standardized instruments.

## 5.3 Research methodology - portrait methodology

Because the philosophical underpinning of this research is constructivism, a qualitative methodology is needed to explore and understand the thoughts, views and opinions of the Chinese top-up students during the period of time when they are studying a one-year top-up programme in a UK institution. The details about the methodology, and the justification for its appropriateness are provided in the subsections below.

### 5.3.1 What is portrait methodology

Portrait methodology explores and describes the individual experiences of those being researched through the production of written documents namely portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Bottery et al., 2009; 2018). Portrait methodology was pioneered initially by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), and was developed further by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997).

Borrowing the artistic definition of portraiture painting, the intention of portrait methodology is to provide the researcher's interpretations of the experiences, views and feelings of those being researched (Free, 2009). Compared with other long-established qualitative methodologies, portrait methodology is relatively new and not yet widely used (Hackman, 2002). Since its introduction in 1983, portrait methodology has been applied mainly in researching education leadership, and culture of school and art (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, 1997, 2005, 2016; Hackman, 2002; Bottery et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013; 2018; Chapman, 2007; Waterhouse, 2007; Brooks, 2017).

At present, the methodology has two major variations: Lawrence-Lightfoot's and Bottery's. Lawrence-Lightfoot's variation, to use an art analogy, strives more for impressionistic similarity, that is, it doesn't replicate the form being painted, but focuses on capturing the effect of light and other factors on the painting (Clancy, 2003). Bottery's variation however aims more at photographic realism, that is, the reproduction of the image of a photo with accuracy and great attention to detail

(Wolf, 2017). The detailed analysis on the differences between Lawrence-Lightfoot's and Bottery's variations is presented in the sections below.

## 5.3.2 The main differences between Lawrence-Lightfoot's and Bottery's variations

### 5.3.2.1 Portrait subjects

Lawrence-Lightfoot uses portrait methodology to study people and places, her research has examined schools, community centres and community schools (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; 1997). For example, in her famous book "*The Good High School: Portraits Of Character And Culture*" (1983), Lawrence-Lightfoot explores mainly the character and culture of a school, and the factors contributing to and influenced by the success of the school. She is interested in capturing various individual stories of students, teachers, and the head teacher of one particular school, especially how these individuals interact within the surrounding contexts of the school. In addition, how the thoughts and minds of these individuals are shaped by these contextual factors.

Bottery, in contrast, focuses mainly on people, in particular those in leadership positions, because his research interest is educational leadership. Bottery uses portrait methodology to explore the perceptions, challenges and difficulties individual UK and/or Hong Kong head teachers face at the time when the interviews take place (Bottery et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013; 2018).

### 5.3.2.2 The voice of the researcher

Lawrence-Lightfoot interweaves the voice of the researcher purposely into the portrait writing, since she believes that a portrait has a dual purpose. It not only describes the story of those being researched, but also is used as a self-portrait to show the personality and characteristics of the researcher. However, this makes it hard for the reader to discern where one ends and the other one starts. Lawrence-Lightfoot variation therefore has received some major concerns over the trustworthiness, in particular, credibility of her research findings. For instance,

Hackman (2002:53) remarked that “in portraiture the line of demarcation between researcher and researched, although not erased totally, does become a bit more hazy”. English in addition questioned whether “the portraitist is creating and moulding a story instead of merely searching for one” (English, 2000: 22). Cottle (2002:536) also offered a similar view to English: “we often run the risk of making the story of the other become what we wish or need it to become, not necessarily what he or she wishes or needs it to become”.

Bottery (2009), in contrast uses portrait methodology to explore, analyse and illustrate mainly the personal stories of those being studied. His intention is to represent the perceived views of the participants faithfully. Even though Bottery admits that writing portraits is an interpretive exercise, and that he also includes his interpretations in a portrait, there is a clear division between the opinions of the participants and the comments of the researcher. One of the strategies he adopts for this purpose is to include the direct quotations of the participants wherever it is possible in a portrait. The below is an example from a portrait Bottery has produced:

So, for Harry, his first year in charge had been one where *‘everything’s been a first’*. What do you do in such a situation? One strategy was to ask yourself: *‘How have I seen other people deal with this?’* But that in itself was clearly insufficient, for each person had their own unique way of dealing with things, and each school had its own history, its own context. So it was essential to also ask: *‘What’s the history of this school, and how [would experienced others] deal with this?’* Nevertheless, doing all of this was still insufficient, for Harry believed that it was vitally important to ask of oneself: *‘What’s my own personal philosophy and belief?’* Only then was it possible to begin the process of *‘trying to match it all up’*, and even then *‘you don’t always get it right’*. (The Harry Croft portrait. Bottery et al., 2008:186).

### 5.3.2.3 Data collection methods

In her research, in particular, that setting out to explore the culture of a school, Lawrence-Lightfoot focuses on identifying the characteristics or features that make a school a good and successful one. She believes that “truth lies in the



integration of various perspectives”, and hence adopts multiple data collection methods such as interviews, observations and informal dialogues (1983:13).

Nevertheless, some researchers believe that Lawrence-Lightfoot fails to convince the reader that the results of her research are believable from the perspective of the participants (Trochim, 2006). For instance, no adequate explanation is given to each individual research method, such as how long each interview lasted and what types of questions were asked in the interviews. Furthermore, no justification is offered explicitly on whether she has utilized any strategies, such as member-check, or peer debriefing to establish credibility of her findings (English, 2000). As a result, it is difficult to judge the validity of the research, and this makes it troublesome for other researchers to decide whether the findings of her research can be applied to their own contexts.

In contrast, building trust and encouraging the participants to express their thoughts and feelings frankly, is very important for Bottery’s variation, as this variation is interested in gaining an understanding of the perceived personal views and uses only semi-structured interviews to collect data (Bottery et al., 2009; 2013). In his research, Bottery uses different approaches for this purpose. For example, the participants are provided with interview questions in advance of their interview. This approach helps to build and sustain rapport with the participants for the following reasons. First, the participants are given more time to think and reflect on their experiences, hence, are able to provide more detailed responses during the interviews. Secondly, Bottery demonstrates to his participants that no questions will come as a surprise, and he has nothing to hide. In addition, he wants to show the participants that they are trusted not to invent lies in the interviews, since they have already seen the questions. And finally, the participants are granted full control over the data collected and their portraits. For instance, the portraits are sent back to the participants for comments and feedback. They can then change or delete any content as they wish.

For the reasons mentioned above, Bottery’s variation seems to have established better trust relationships between the researcher and the participants. This is

reflected in the feedback collected from the participants during the research (Bottery et al., 2009; 2013). As a result, Bottery fulfils his research purposes and the research findings appear to be trustworthy.

#### 5.3.2.4 The researcher-participant relationship

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) appears to offer a rather contradictory view over the researcher and participant relationship. She firstly advocates that data collection should last over a long period of time, for instance at least several months and that intimate relationships should be established between the researcher and the participants. The researcher thus acts almost like an insider of the participant community:

The quality and complexity of the relationship will be shaped.....by the duration of time spent and the frequency of encounters between the researcher and the actor, as well as by their personalities and the chemistry of their interactions. .... A single encounter with an actor that is brief and largely informal will not have the same depth, complexity, or resonance as a research relationship that spans several months where the participants meet frequently and talk about matters of great personal meaning (page 138).

Meanwhile, she also suggests that it is critical and essential to set up boundaries:

Reciprocity between the portraitist and the actor is more likely to occur when the structure, boundaries, and commitments of the relationship are made explicit from the beginning (page 115).

However, it is highly difficult to achieve both relationships simultaneously, for the intimate personal relationships established with the participants imply that it is difficult to set and keep the boundaries between the researcher and the participants.

In contrast, it appears that Bottery advises that a researcher, when using his version of the portrait methodology, should position himself or herself as an “outsider”, not “insider”. Written portraits, in his opinion, should be genuine descriptions of the participants, and not of the researcher.

A third distinctive feature of this variation lies in that it attempts a clear separation of voice between the researcher and the researched. Whilst a portrait 'story' was written by the researcher, an attempt was made to be as faithful as possible to the perceived meaning of the interviewee. To this end, two things were done. First, a fellow academic read both portrait and transcript to see whether they felt that the one was a fair representation of the other. Second, respondent validation was used by sending both portrait and transcript back to the interviewee for their comments. By doing so, other parties were able to retrace the portrait construction, and disagree with it if they felt it was not a fair representation. (Bottery et al., 2009: 85)

In addition, the single data collection method used helps to prevent other direct interactions between the researcher and the participants. This as a result will help increase the trustworthiness of the research.

### 5.3.2.5 Longitudinal, cross-sectional study versus longitudinal study

Another major difference between the two variations is the study design. Lawrence-Lightfoot's variation is a type of longitudinal study, whilst Bottery's variation is a combination of longitudinal and cross-sectional studies.

For Longitudinal studies, data need to be collected repeatedly from the same participants over an extended amount of time (Schmidt et al., 2005; Cohen et al., 2013). The main focus of this type of study is "continuity", also "progress and change in status (Rajulton, 2001:170)". In Lawrence-Lightfoot's case, data collection is conducted as a single process, but is continued for at least several months (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

A cross-sectional study however "produces a 'snapshot' of a population at a particular time (Cohen et al., 2013: 267)". The data collected therefore only represents what is happening at that point of time. It is suggested that a cross-sectional study may be used sometimes on its own, or together with a longitudinal study (Cohen et al., 2013). This is the case in Bottery's variation. For example, in his published study "*portrait methodology and educational leadership*" (2009), the research started initially as a cross-sectional study, as the purpose was to investigate how individual school head teachers handle the issues and problems encountered at one moment in time (Bottery et al., 2009). Because of the positive

feedback received from the participants, the research was then developed into a longitudinal study and follow-up interviews were conducted later on. The methodology therefore became a professional development tool and provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect upon and develop their skills and career growth continuity and systematically.

	<b>Bottery</b>	<b>Lawrence-Lightfoot</b>
<b>Research area</b>	Educational leadership	Culture of the school
<b>Research methods</b>	Semi-structured interviews	Interviews, observations, and informal dialogues
<b>Study design</b>	Longitudinal and cross sectional	Longitudinal
<b>Role of the researcher</b>	Outsider-researcher  The researcher's voice is purposely separated from the participants.  But it is critical to establish and maintain a relationship of trust	Insider-researcher  A close and deep relationship between the researcher and the participants  The researcher's voice is purposely woven into the portrait.
<b>Key purpose(s) of a portrait</b>	The perceptions and challenges school head teachers face at present	Dual purposes: self-portrait of the researcher, and a systematic examination of those being researched
<b>Portrait subject</b>	Individuals: - Primary and secondary school head teachers in the U.K and Hong Kong	Individuals and objects: - The emphasis is on the school itself, the portraits of the principals are considered as part of the overall portrait of the school.

Table 5.1 The comparison of Bottery's and Lawrence-Lightfoot's variations of portrait methodology

### 5.3.3 Justification for the appropriateness of portrait methodology

In social science research, apart from portrait methodology, qualitative methodologies such as life history, narrative inquiry and case study are also commonly used to explore individual experiences over a period of time in depth.

For example, portrait methodology sits within the life history approach. A life history is a story told by an individual about his or her life within particular contexts, such as social and political, to a third person (Atkinson, 1998; Sikes & Everington, 2016). As with portrait methodology, the life history approach tends to use the participants' own words as much as possible when the researcher presents the story of those being researched. However, a life history narrative is considered a joint production between the researcher and the participant, and is normally written in first person (Atkinson, 1998). In addition, the data are collected through multiple methods, such as semi-structured interviews and examining documentary evidence (Sikes & Everington, 2016).

Case study in particular is considered very appropriate to answer “how” and “why” research questions (Zainal, 2007; Yin, 2011; 2017). Narrative inquiry, as with portrait methodology, is also based on storytelling, that is, “to systematically gather, analyse, and represent people’s stories as told by them” (Etherington, 2013:4). A portrait, in fact, is a written narrative. Moreover, these two methodological approaches are often used in longitudinal studies due to the fact that they are designed to develop a rich and deep understanding of the individuals.

In spite of the similarities mentioned above, portrait methodology is felt more suitable for this research mainly because of the following reasons. Firstly, research adopting case study or narrative inquiry tends to explore individual experiences over a long period of time, sometimes even the whole life span (Sigeman & Rider, 2008; Reese et al., 2011). However, this research aims to “capture the thoughts, feelings and self-reflections of individuals in particular contexts at a moment in time (Bottery et al., 2009:83)”. That is, the one-year experiences of the Chinese top-up students when they are studying a top-up programme in one particular UK institution.

And secondly, case study and narrative inquiry aim to understand the social phenomenon being researched from many different aspects, hence often use more than one data collection method such as semi-structured interviews, direct

observations, documents and field notes to gather different sources of evidence (Cohen et al., 2013). Many of these methods expect the researcher to become part of the community of those being researched, and to involve heavily in the daily life of the participants. Subsequently, when adopting either of these two methodologies in research, a researcher often takes an insider position. Narrative inquiry, in particular considers the final narratives as collaborative work between the researcher and participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Nevertheless, this research intends to explore only one dimension of the phenomenon, that is, the perceived views and opinions of the Chinese top-up students during their one-year study in this UK institution. Therefore, this research uses only one data collection method to collect data.

#### 5.3.4 Justification for the appropriateness of Bottery's variation

Based on the differences between Bottery's and Lawrence-Lightfoot's variations of portrait methodology (see section 5.3.2 for further details), and the purpose of this research, Bottery's variation is considered more suitable for this study than Lawrence-Lightfoot's variation, mainly because of the following reasons.

Firstly and most importantly, Bottery's variation helps enhance the trustworthiness, in particular the credibility and confirmability of this research (see section 5.4 for further details). For example, one of the key features of Bottery's variation is to send the portrait back to the participants for comments and feedback. By using this variation, the researcher of this research is able to check with the participants on whether the interpretations made in the portraits reflect their thoughts and feelings at the time faithfully and accurately, and amend the portraits accordingly if necessary. In addition, Bottery's variation aims to truthfully report the opinions and feelings of the participants, and uses their direct quotes wherever is appropriate when writing a portrait. However, Lawrence-Lightfoot's variation intentionally mixes her views and those of the participants together in

the portraits she produces, because she considers these portraits also as her self-portraits.

And secondly, as mentioned above, this research is only interested in the perceived views of the participants, hence uses a single data collection method. However, as with case study and narrative inquiry, Lawrence-Lightfoot's variation is more interested in exploring the social phenomenon being researched from many different perspectives, such as the key features of a good and successful high school. As a result, she uses multiple data collection methods.

### 5.3.5 The limitations of Bottery's variation

As mentioned above, gaining trust is particularly critical for Bottery's variation of portrait methodology. The strategies Bottery adopts to develop and reinforce a trust relationship with the participants (see section 5.3.2.3 for further details) seem to work sufficiently when drawing up portraits for school head teachers (Bottery et al., 2009). As portrait methodology isn't yet greatly used, these strategies however need to be verified more adequately with other types of sample population, such as the participants in this research. Compared with school head teachers, the Chinese top-up students are young, immature and have hardly had any work experiences.

Since the data are collected only through semi-structured interviews when adopting Bottery's variation, the ability and experience of the researcher in conducting research interviews will also have some direct impact on the quality of the data. In this respect, Bottery's variation may be a challenging and difficult approach for a new researcher to use. For example, the researcher of this study had no previous experiences in this area and found it particularly challenging to probe the participants in the interviews at the beginning. Nevertheless, the researcher got better gradually at it and had the opportunity to practise her interview skills through the pilot interviews. The related self-reflection in relation to the use of portrait methodology is provided in chapter twelve.

## 5.4 Trustworthiness of this research

### 5.4.1 Credibility

This research is based on the constructivism paradigm, and uses portrait methodology, a qualitative methodology to explore the perceived views and opinions of the Chinese top-up students within a particular context and setting (when they study a one-year top-up programme in a UK institution). The data in this research is collected through semi-structured interviews only, so it is highly important to demonstrate to the reader that the researcher has established credibility, that is, the participants disclosed their real thoughts and feelings at the time when the interviews take place (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004; Lietz & Zayas, 2010). For this reason, the researcher must provide evidence of high level of trust and rapport built and maintained between her and the participants. This section focuses mainly on describing the strategies used in this research, and more evidence will be shared in the next chapter.

#### 5.4.1.1 Eliminating the effect of coercion and building trust

In order to build trust, the researcher firstly needed to deal with the challenges relating to the use of students as the participants - the risk of coercion and the possible power relation (RCN, 2011). Coercion refers to the fact that the participants may be forced to take part in research rather than voluntarily (Milne, 2005). The unbalanced power relationship may exist when the researcher has a direct academic relationship with the participants, for example, through teaching, grading students' work and personal tutoring. In this context, students are considered as disadvantaged respondents because they "lack the power to withdraw from researchers" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002:521).

Consequently, these participants "may simply distrust the intentions and meanings of academic research", and/or withhold information during the interview (Alder & Alder, 2003:159). Since the researcher (an academic) and the participants (Chinese top-up students) are from the same academic school, this



research needs to eliminate the threat of coercion and power relation, and aims to establish an equalized research relationship with the participants. For these reasons, prior to the start of data collection process (in early 2015), the researcher made the following requests to the academic school, which were granted:

- The researcher won't teach any modules involving Chinese top-up students in the 2015-16 cohort;
- The researcher won't mark any assignments, exam papers or other coursework of Chinese top-up students in the 2015-16 cohort;
- The researcher won't have any Chinese top-up students in the 2015-16 cohort as academic tutees.

Based on the suggestion of Alder and Alder (2003) - "it is especially important not to hurry respondents into interview situations prematurely" (page 163), additional efforts are made to gain trust and build rapport with the participants prior to the start of the first set of interviews. Strategies and techniques used include: 1) sending interview questions to the participants in advance; 2) providing a trust document signed by the researcher; and 3) arranging pre-interview informal meetings with the participants.

#### 5.4.1.1.1 Providing the interview questions in advance

This strategy has demonstrated its effectiveness in gaining trust of the participants in the literature (Bottery et al., 2009; Heinrich & Podkul, 2011). In this research, a list of the principal interview questions, written in English and Chinese, was sent to the participants ahead of the interviews by email. The detailed explanation is provided in the section below.

#### 5.4.1.1.2 Providing a trust document signed by the researcher

Obtaining informed consents is considered an important ethical procedure, and commonly used in different types of research, including Social Science. Foot and

Sanford (2004) however argue that the use of informed consents actually disempowers research participants, in particular, students. This is mainly because student participants tend to feel less powerful to actually take advantage of the rights assigned to them by this legal document. This may consequently jeopardise the establishment of trust with the participants.

Consequently, this research didn't request signed informed consents from the participants. Instead, they were given trust documents (Participant Information Sheet), which were written in Chinese and English (see appendix 2 for a copy of the trust document). As with an informed consent form, this document included the basic ethical rules such as an explanation of the meaning and purpose of this research, a promise on anonymity and confidentiality to the participants, and the meanings of voluntary participation within the context of this particular research. Nevertheless, this trust document was signed by the researcher (the related ethical consideration is provided in section 5.6). In doing so, the participants were assured that they aren't required to fulfil any particular expectations in this research. In addition, it helped build an equal research relationship and reduce the participants' anxiety and pressure (Smith & Richardson, 1983; Foot & Sanford, 2004).

#### 5.4.1.1.3 Arranging pre-interview informal meetings

As part of rapport building procedure, the researcher also had one-to-one face-to-face informal meetings with the participants before the start of the first set of interviews (the moving in interviews). Each meeting was about 30 minutes and the main purpose was to provide an opportunity for the researcher and participants to meet and get to know each other. In addition, the participants were provided with sufficient information about the research, and given time to ask questions and express concerns if there is any. During this meeting, the researcher also explained, signed on the trust document, and gave it to each individual participant.

#### 5.4.1.1.4 Maintaining rapport with the participants through the data collection process

Because this is a longitudinal study, and there was on average a three-month or four-month gap between the interviews, maintaining rapport with the participants was equally as important as building rapport in this research.

The initial plan was to organise casual social gatherings with the participants over tea and coffee every two months in between the interviews. However, this plan didn't work, since most of the time in this year the participants were busy trying to keep up on top of their coursework and exams. In this situation, the researcher opted for using WeChat, a Chinese social media platform to keep a regular contact with the participants. WeChat is very popular among Chinese, and the researcher had already used it to arrange informal meetings with the participants previously.

Between the interviews, the researcher messaged the participants regularly to find out how they were getting on with their studies and life on campus; she sent holiday greetings (Halloween, Christmas and Easter holidays), as well as recommendations for holiday destinations and activities. In addition, the researcher provided timely answers and help to the participants, such as a reminder about clocks change, and information regarding degree classifications.

The regular communications via WeChat seemed to have worked effectively. The participants appeared to appreciate the fact that the researcher was genuinely interested in their personal experiences and well-being, and didn't use them for exploitative purpose.

*I enjoyed the first interview we had. And after that, I feel that you are really caring about us, and I can trust you as you messaged us regularly on WeChat [to check how we are getting on], especially during the holiday season and when we were preparing for exams and assignments. (David)*

*It was great that we were able to chat with each other on WeChat even before I arrived in Britain. I felt that I could trust you because you really helped me out and answered many of my questions. (Laura)*

The greater detail, including the evidence of the effectiveness of WeChat, is presented in chapter eleven.

#### 5.4.1.1.5 Other techniques

Additional techniques, such as audit trail, and member checking are used to improve credibility and confirmability of the current research. Audit trails are detailed descriptions of the development of all aspects of a research study, including research design, findings, and data analysis (Carcary, 2009). They are used mainly to enhance the confirmability of qualitative research. In this research, the researcher for example provides an audit trail for the principal interview questions asked at all three interviews (appendices 3 to 5). In addition, justifications for choosing the theoretical foundations, such as the U curve model and Bottery's variation of portrait methodology are provided in chapter four and five.

Member checking is another strategy used commonly in qualitative research to achieve and enhance the credibility of the research findings. When using this technique, a researcher sends the data, such as the interview transcripts, back to the participants to check the accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). In this research, the participants were interviewed three times. The researcher emailed the written portraits (the Chinese version) back to the participants to review before the start of the next interview, and related questions were asked specifically about their feedback on the portrait in the next interview. When it was necessary, amendments were made accordingly to the portrait. The questions relating to the comparison between reading portraits and interview transcripts were asked specifically in the impact interviews (see appendix 6 for the details of the impact interview questions), and it appeared that the participants preferred to read their portraits over the interview transcripts due to the fact that it was much more fun and easier to read a portrait than an interview transcript, and as a consequence, the participants were encouraged to reflect more deeply on this one-year study abroad journey. The details about the contribution of the portrait methodology in

this research, and the researcher's self-reflection are provided in chapter eleven twelve.

Some strategies mentioned above were tested in pilot studies, such as arranging a pre-interview meeting, treating the interviewer and the participants as equals, and demonstrating genuine care to the participants, and they were proven effective in building trust and maintaining a close and equal research relationship with the participants (see chapter six for further detail). As a result, the researcher believes that the portraits produced are an accurate reflection of the participants' perceptions at the time when the interviews were conducted (Bottery et al., 2013).

### 5.4.2 Confirmability

Confirmability concerns to what extent the research findings can be verified or confirmed by readers (Morrow, 2005; Jeanfreau & Jack, 2010). In other words, the reader needs to be convinced that the findings of the research were grounded in the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

This research has established confirmability mainly because the researcher has successfully developed a trust relationship with the participants. In addition, this research uses member checking to check with the participants whether the portraits truly and accurately represent their views and feelings at the time, and make amendments when it is needed. This technique is a key feature of Bottery's variation (see section 5.4.1.1.5 for further details). And furthermore, the researcher uses the participants' own words wherever necessary and appropriate when writing the portraits (see samples of the portraits in appendix 1).

### 5.4.3 Dependability

Dependability is concerned with the reliability of the research findings. Due to the fact that this research involves human subjects - the Chinese top-up students, and their views, feelings and behaviours are influenced and shaped by environment and other contexts, it is infeasible to replicate the research setting and/or the research findings. In this respect, this research uses techniques such

as thick description (see the section below for further details) to provide sufficient information and details about the research process and procedures, with an intention to show to the reader that the findings are consistent with the data collected, and the researcher didn't misinterpret, invent or misrepresent the data.

Dependability is further enhanced as this research has established credibility. This is because Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress there is a close association between dependability and credibility. If a qualitative research study is able to establish credibility, then simultaneously dependability is also established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### 5.4.4 Transferability

In this research, it is also important for the researcher to demonstrate that it has established transferability, that is, this research has provided evidence explicitly to help the reader decide whether and to what extent the findings of this research may be applicable to their own situation or research setting (Shenton, 2004; Hennink et al., 2010). This is because this study is qualitative in nature, and the intention is to understand the individual experiences that are highly context specific. In this respect, this research uses a small size of sample (12, see chapter six for further details) to gain the richness and depth of understanding this research aims for.

For the reasons mentioned above, the results of this research can't be generalized widely to a large population. Nevertheless, the value lies in the fact that the findings of this research will provide some potential implications and directions for future research in the area of international top-up students' transition. For instance, if future research is conducted with a similar sample group (young, and inexperienced Chinese top-up students) and within similar contexts, there is a possibility that it may gain similar results as this research, that is, the students experienced a very difficult time when they studied their top-up programme in this UK institution, and were unable to function and manage their academic and social situation properly. However, there is also a possibility that

future research may gain different results, since individuals can hold different views and opinions even in the same social situation.

In order to help the reader relate the findings of this research to their own situation, the researcher must use techniques such as thick description, to provide a detailed explanation for the following areas, such as the research contexts, the research design, the predictions made, and the supporting evidence. Thick description “involves much more than amassing great detail: it speaks to context and meaning as well as interpreting participant intentions in their behaviours and actions (Ponterotto, 2006: 541)”. For example, in this research, chapter two is devoted to explaining the particular contexts of the research; chapter five and six provide detailed explanations and justifications on the chosen methodology, the research design, and the data analysis process. In addition, a reflection about the impact of the methodology on the researcher herself is included in chapter twelve.

## 5.5 The position of the researcher in this research

When conducting qualitative research, a researcher commonly takes an insider or outsider position. An insider researcher may be a member of the sample population or at least shares some similarities with the participants, such as gender, culture, and language. In contrast, an outsider researcher doesn't belong to the group, or share the similarities mentioned (Saidin, 2017).

The researcher in this research takes a combination of insider and outsider position during the data collection and analysis process. For example, at the beginning of the research, the researcher intended to take only an outsider position, due to the consideration that this research aims to understand the perceived views of the participants. In order to establish the trustworthiness of the research, and remain to be as loyal as possible to the thoughts and feelings of the participants, the researcher didn't take part in their academic or social activities, even though she showed genuine care to the participants with an intention to develop an equal research relationship and build rapport.

Nevertheless, during the data collection process, the researcher came to realise that she had to take the insider position as well. This is because the researcher is also Chinese, and shared the same cultural background as the participants. In addition, the researcher conducted the research in the same academic school where the participants studied. Since she was working at the Business School at the time, and had experience of teaching some Chinese top-up students previously, the researcher was also familiar with the academic settings of the institution and the top-up programmes, such as the programme curricula, teaching and learning approaches, and assessment strategies. Meanwhile, the researcher had insider knowledge of the support provided to international students on campus.

The combination of insider and outsider position has helped the researcher build and maintain close and equal research relationships with the participants, which is highly important to achieve the research aim and purpose. On the other hand, the insider position has helped the researcher gain a better understanding of the challenges and difficulties the participants were facing, and also the causes of these problems at the national, institutional, and personal level (see chapter ten for details).

## 5.6 Research ethics

This research has fulfilled the requirements of and followed the guidelines set by the School of Education and Social Sciences at the University of Hull, and the British Educational Research Association (BERA). As the participants of this research were from the Business School, at an Institution in Northern England, an ethical application form was also submitted to and subsequently approved by the research committee in the Business School, in addition to the one submitted to the School of Education and Social Sciences.



### 5.6.1 Informed consents

As mentioned previously (see section 5.4.1.1.2), the participants in this research were given the trust documents signed by the researcher, and they weren't requested to provide signed informed consents. The researcher was aware of the ethical requirements of the Faculty at the time, and the research ethics application form of this research was approved by the Faculty research ethics committee. The trust document as a result was accepted as a justifiable alternative to the informed consent form, in order to generate the high level of trust this research aimed for, because otherwise it would affect the relationships the researcher was trying to build with the participants if she asked the participants to provide signed informed consents.

### 5.6.2 Ethical procedures

The opening questions for the semi-structured interviews were tested in pilot interviews, and evaluated by two experts in the field of higher education. Care was taken to ensure that no sensitive or uncomfortable questions would be asked in the interviews, and the participants were notified clearly about their rights. Attention was also paid in relation to the use of personal data in research. Guided by the UK Data Protection Act (1998) and The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Legislation.gov.uk, 1998; ico, n.d.), the researcher stated explicitly that the data collected would only be used for this research study, as well as the future publications and presentations. It won't be shared, or used by other third party researchers (Hall & Drisko, 2001).

## 5.7 Summary

This chapter focused on three key areas. Firstly, it explained why the Constructivism paradigm was felt most appropriate for this research. It was mainly because this research intended to explore only the perceived views of a group of Chinese top-up students, which were affected and shaped significantly by their surrounding contexts. In addition, the researcher of this research believed

multiple interpretations of a single reality. The Positivism and Postpositivism paradigms weren't considered suitable for this research because both paradigms believed that there was a single reality and truth existed independently of the environment and society. However, the researcher of this research believes the existence of multiple interpretations of single reality, and also what this research intends to explore (the personal experiences of a group of Chinese top-up students) is social enquiry.

Secondly, this chapter partially answered the SQ "*what contributions does the portrait methodology make to understanding the perceptions of Chinese top-up students during their transition*"? This research chose to use portrait methodology, in particular Bottery's variation, rather than other qualitative methodologies such as narrative inquiry and case study to answer the main research question. Portrait methodology was felt more appropriate because this research was only interested in understanding the personal experiences of the Chinese top-up students at a particular moment in time, but not their entire life. In addition, as this research aimed to investigate the perceived views of the participants, rather than some external reality, the data were collected using only semi-structured interviews, instead of multiple methods.

Bottery's variation was felt more appropriate as the research purpose and intention of this study were similar to Bottery's research. In addition, the strategies and techniques Bottery adopted, such as member checking, and providing interview questions in advance, helped the researcher develop and maintain a trust relationship with the participants. This consequently helped enhance credibility and confirmability of this research.

And finally, this chapter explained how this research has satisfied the trustworthiness criteria. The researcher was able to show that the findings of this research were supported by the data collected, and truly represented the thoughts and feelings of the Chinese top-up students at the time when they were interviewed. As mentioned above, the researcher built and maintained a trust relationship with the participants, which encouraged them to express their

thoughts and feelings at the time openly and freely. In addition, the confirmability was enhanced by using techniques such as member checking.

Since the research settings and contexts can't be fully replicated in future research, the researcher, in order to establish transferability, provided sufficient information about the research design, the data collection and analysis process, to help other researchers, practitioners and/or policy to relate the findings of this research in their own situation.

As the focus of this chapter is on the strategic approach, the attention in the next chapter turns to explain the actual research design, such as the sample, sampling strategies, the pilot study and the data collection method.

# Chapter Six: Research Design and data analysis

## 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the philosophical foundation of this research and offered justifications for the methodology adopted in this research. Rooted in constructivism, this research intends to understand the individual viewpoints and feelings of a group of Chinese top-up students when they are transitioning through a regional UK university. Bottery's variation of the portrait methodology was considered more appropriate for this research mainly because of the nature of the research, and the research purpose.

This chapter describes the actual research design of this research and the data analysis process. It consists of six sections. The first two sections provide justifications for the sample size, and sampling strategies selected. The third section offers a detailed description of the pilot study conducted, and the list of the principal interview questions used in this research. The fourth and fifth sections are centred around the data collection method adopted in this research, and also provide an explanation and justification on why the data are collected three times during the study. The final section describes the process of the actual data analysis and interpretation, such as data transcription, first coding and second coding.

## 6.2 Sampling strategies

Palys (2008:697) comments, "the biggest question any researcher needs to ask him/herself is what exactly it is that she or he wants to accomplish and what she or he wants to know, and the appropriate sampling strategy will follow from that". Research population for the study consisted of over 200 Chinese top-up students studying in this UK institution between 2015-16. Due to time and resource constraints, it was impossible to study the whole population. A sample group

therefore was selected to explore and gain the depth and richness of the understanding this research aims for.

This study used three sampling strategies to select the participants, they are: convenience sampling, snowball sampling and opportunity sampling. Convenience sampling allows a researcher to use the most accessible individuals as the research participants (Etikan et al., 2016). When using snowball sampling technique, “one subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on” (Vogt & Johnson, 2015: 414). Opportunity sampling enables a researcher to select the samples who are available at the time and willing to take part in the research (McLeod, 2014).

The sample population was felt conveniently accessible because the researcher and the Chinese top-up students were from the same academic school. These Chinese top-up students, in principle, were easier to recruit for the study than the students from other academic schools. Since the researcher didn't know any of the Chinese top-up students in this particular cohort (2015-16) beforehand, the first few participants were recruited or recommended by the pilot participants, they then helped recruit the rest of the participants.

The researcher also used an opportunity sampling technique because the Chinese top-up students arrived at this UK institution at different times in summer 2015, since they had to study a pre-sessional language course first before the start of their top-up programme, and the length of the course varied between 15 weeks to 5 weeks. The researcher only became aware of the difference in the pre-sessional course length when she put the sample group of participants together. As shown in chapter eight and nine, the length of the pre-sessional course however seemed to have made little difference in terms of their language and academic development during the study of their top-up programme, judging by the comments of the participants.

Even though the samples in this research were selected in a non-random manner, they are considered to be able to present the population sufficiently. This is because the Chinese top-up students coming to study the top-up programme in

this particular UK institution were of a similar age, and shared a similar educational background. For example, they studied a three-year programme in their home institution in China first, and then came to study in this UK institution. In addition, they chose to study in this UK institution because of the partnership agreement between their home institution in China and this UK institution. Meanwhile, almost all Chinese top-up students in this UK institution needed to study a pre-sessional language course prior to their top-up programme.

### 6.3 Sample size

15 participants were selected initially for this research. However, at the end of the pre-sessional course, the sample size was reduced to 12. This is because one participant on the 8-week course decided to withdraw. In addition, two participants (one was on the 15-weeks course, and the other one was on the 5-week course) had to leave the UK as they failed the pre-sessional course assessments in September 2015, so they were unable to participate in the research.

This sample size is considered adequate for this research, mainly because the purpose of this research is to develop a rich understanding of the perceived views of a group of Chinese top-up students when they are studying a one-year top-up programme in a UK institution. Therefore, the researcher isn't attempting to generalize the findings of this research to a much wider population. The details relating to the transferability of the research is provided in the previous chapter (section 5.4.4).

In addition, the sample size is felt large enough to address the main research question and sub questions. As mentioned previously, this is a longitudinal qualitative study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the researcher built and maintained trust relationships with the participants through the data collection process. As a consequence, the sample size of 12 has enabled the researcher to develop the depth of understanding this research aims for.

In order to protect their confidentiality and anonymity, all participants were assigned English names as pseudonyms. This was because the participants said that they preferred to have English names as they were studying in the UK.

## 6.4 Participants' details

All participants, before coming to Britain, had studied in their home institution in China (CU1, CU2, and CU3) for three years. Both CU1 and CU2 are located in Northern China, and were offering SQA HND programmes to Chinese students through the collaboration between their international colleges and the Chinese Service Centre for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE). CU3 is located in Southern China, and was offering international programmes to Chinese students. The participants reported that all three Chinese institutions had a number of articulation partnerships with various UK institutions, which would allow them to study a top-up programme in the UK. The detailed profiles of the participants are listed as follows:

Alex was 20-year-old, and had studied an international programme in Finance in CU3. She achieved a score of IELTS 5.5. Before coming to Britain, Alex had no previous experience of living or studying abroad.

Alan was 20-year-old, and had studied an HND programme in Financial Services in CU1. He received a score of IELTS 4.5. Before coming to Britain, Alan had no previous experience of living or studying abroad.

Amanda was 21-year-old and had studied an international programme in Finance in CU3. She received a score of IELTS 4.5. After graduating from CU3, Amanda didn't study her top-up programme straightway, but choose to take a short-term (4 months) English training course in this UK institution instead, due to some family issues. As a result, Amanda studied her top up programme a year later than expected.

Daniel was 20-year-old, and had studied an HND programme in Accounting in CU2. He achieved a score of IELTS 5. Before coming to Britain, Daniel had no previous experience of living or studying abroad.

David was 20-year-old, and had studied an international programme in Finance in CU3. He gained a score of 5 for his IELTS test. David had an aunt living in Australia. When he was at primary school, David and his mum visited his aunt and stayed in Australia for a month.

Harry was 20-year-old, and had studied an HND programme in Business Management in CU2. He achieved a score of 5.5 for his IELTS test. Before coming to Britain, Harry travelled to Japan and South Korea with his parents, but he had never been to the Europe before.

Jane was 20-year-old, and had studied an international programme in Business Management in CU3. She achieved a score of 5.5 for her IELTS test. Before coming to Britain, Jane had no previous experience of living or studying abroad.

Laura was 20-year-old, and had studied an international programme in Hotel management in CU3. She achieved a score of 5 for her IELTS test. Laura had an aunt living in Australia. When she was at senior high school, Laura visited her aunt with her mum and stayed in Australia for a month.

Lisa was 20-year-old, and had studied an HND programme in Financial Services in UC2. She achieved a score of 5 for her IELTS test. Lisa had an uncle living in Scotland. Soon after graduating from senior high school, Lisa came to Britain to visit her uncle and his family and stayed with them for a month.

Michelle was 19-year-old, and had studied an HND programme in Accounting in CU2. She achieved a score of 5 for her IELTS test. Michelle was at least a year younger than others because she skipped the last year of senior high school, and didn't attend the gaokao, the Chinese National College Entry Exam. Before coming to Britain, Michelle had no previous experience of living or studying abroad.



Rachelle was 20-year-old, and had studied an HND programme in Accounting in CU2. She achieved a score of 5.5 for her IELTS test. Before coming to Britain, Rachel had no previous experience of living or studying abroad.

Sophie was 20-year-old, and had studied an international programme in Business Trade in CU3. She received a score of 4.5 for her IELTS test. Before coming to Britain, Sophie had no previous experience of living or studying abroad.

## 6.5 The pilot study

Before the interviews took place, a pilot study was carried out with the intention to fulfil three purposes. The first was to trial the strategies mentioned in the previous chapter relating to gaining trust and establishing rapport with the participants. The second was to test and refine the pre-defined interview questions and the final one was for the researcher to practise her interviewing skills.

### 6.5.1 Pilot study and the outcomes

The pilot interviews were conducted at the end of May in 2015 with 2 participants. They both studied a top-up programme in this UK institution between 2014 -15.

The following techniques appeared to have worked effectively in the pilot interviews and were adopted subsequently in the actual interviews. Firstly, the researcher felt that it was important and effective to create a positive and relaxed atmosphere. To enable this, the researcher, after introducing herself and the purpose of the research, started both interviews with some simple and casual conversations. As both participants were going back to China soon for the summer holiday, the initial conversations were around the price of airline tickets, where the participants were from and the local food.

Secondly, the researcher offered advice and assistance proactively during the conversations, the aim of which was to demonstrate to the pilot participants that the researcher genuinely cared about them, rather than used them only for the

research purpose. This approach seemed to have helped build rapport and strengthen the researcher-participant relationship, for example, one participant, during conversations, expressed an interest in applying for the Master's study in this institution, but he worried that he might have missed the deadline. The researcher then offered help immediately, such as checking with the school admission office on behalf of the participant. She responded to the participant within a day after the interview. The participant seemed to be really grateful, and subsequently helped look for participants to take part in the actual interviews.

Finally, the researcher treated the pilot participants as equals and made a big effort to be honest with the participants, for example, while walking back to the car park together with the female participant after the interview, the researcher answered the personal questions in relation to marriage and children truthfully without hesitation. This seemed to have gained more trust and encouraged the participant to be more open and frank. As she commented: "since you are so honest, I would tell you a little bit more about myself". She then shared some additional valuable information, which wasn't covered in the interview.

At the end of the interview, both participants were asked directly for feedback and suggestions for improvements to the interview questions and strategies used for establishing trust. The feedback is summarized as follows. It appeared that conducting the interviews in Chinese really helped put the participants at ease, because they could focus on the conversations, not the language. As one participant commented, if the interview was in English, he would probably only be able to reply the questions with answers such as "yes, yes, hum" or "OK". Additionally, the conversational style interviews were favoured by the participants because they said that they felt more relaxed, also it was easier for them to engage in the casual conversations. One participant commented "*it was very helpful when you told me that [the interview] would only be 'a casual chat', I felt so much more relaxed*". Moreover, both participants commented that providing the trust documents and interview questions in advance were somewhat useful, because "*it would otherwise be difficult to understand [what the interview was about]*".

The pilot participants also provided the following suggestions as improvements for the informal meetings in the light of achieving the purpose of establishing the initial trust and rapport, which were adopted subsequently during the data collection process. Firstly, the participants should be informed clearly that the interviews were going to be some informal and general chats, as the word “interview” sounded overly formal, which could potentially put the participants off taking part in the research, or make them feel more anxious in the interviews.

Secondly, during the informal meeting and the interviews, the participants needed to be ensured explicitly and repeatedly that whatever they would say in the interviews would have no impact at all on their academic results in this institution. One pilot participant believed that she didn’t get the idea clearly from the informal meeting, and commented that *“it would be really helpful if you could explain this (research-participant relationship) a bit more in detail”*, otherwise, she said, *“there would be some impacts [on what people want to say in the interview] because you are a lecturer here”*.

## 6.5.2 Finalizing the interview questions

The majority of the interview questions remained the same as for the pilot interviews, as both participants seemed to be happy with them. However, changes were made to a small proportion of the interview questions, based on the recommendations provided by Leech (2002) and Smith and Osborn (2007). This was to ensure that these questions were more appropriate for the forthcoming interviews.

For instance, one issue identified was the use of presuming questions. As suggested by Leech (2002:666): “so one danger [of using presuming questions] is that the respondent will bluff to save face and make something up”. The researcher unintentionally used questions such as *are you interesting in going back to China or taking up a Masters study after finishing the top-up programme?* to assume that these were the plans that the participants would make for their future. This might simply close off other possible replies and stop the participants

from disclosing their honest views and opinions. As shown below, appropriate amendments were then made to replace the presuming questions identified to more general, open questions:

	Questions before	Questions after
Moving in	Are you interested in going back to China or taking up a Masters study after finishing the top-up programme?	Do you have plans for the future after you complete the top-up programme?
Moving through	Is what you are experiencing now very different from that in your Chinese university?	Compared with the teaching approaches in China, what things are the same? And what things are different?

Table 6.1 The amendments to the interview questions

Additionally, some questions, such as *do you have any international traveling experience?* and *how are you supporting your living in the U.K. financially?* were taken off the list because they were more appropriate as probing questions to prompt the participants to talk and provide additional questions in interesting areas around the main themes.

## 6.6 The data collection stages - moving in, moving through and moving out

This research is longitudinal and cross sectional in nature, because it intends to explore the personal experiences of a group of Chinese top-up students while they are transitioning through their top-up programme in the UK, also because transition is a process of continuous change, and “the only way to understand people in transition is to study them at several points in time” (Anderson et al., 2011:p48). Consequently, data were collected three times at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages over a full academic year between 2015 and 2016.

The terms moving in, moving through and moving out are proposed by Schlossberg and colleagues (2005, 2006; 2011) to describe the position of the individuals in a transition. “Moving in” is the start of a new transition; “moving through” is the next stage, in which the individuals are going through the transition; and “moving out” is the end of the transition (Sorensen, 2018; Wall et al., 2018). These three stages correspond well to the adjustment stages of the U curve model. For instance, the honeymoon stage seems to happen at the start of a new transition. At the moving through stage, the individuals are in the process of adjusting to the new environment and surroundings, hence may experience a number of crises and start feeling more settled in once they get to know the new culture better. At the moving out stage, the individuals may become more familiar with the new culture and may be feeling more comfortable with living in the new environment.

In this research, the moving in stage refers to the pre-departure and post arrival period. As mentioned below (section 6.6.1), this is mainly because the moving in interviews were conducted after the participants arrived in Britain, due to the fact that geographically the participants were widely spread out across China. Future research on the transition of international top-up students should separate these two stages and explore specifically their pre-departure background, and also their post arrival experiences (see chapter twelve for further details).

The moving through stage includes the period between the start of their top-up programme to the end of their first semester. The moving out stage includes the period between the start of their second semester to the end of their top-up programme. As mentioned in the section below, the interviews at each stage were designed to explore the thoughts and feelings of these Chinese top-up students towards their studies, social life and other related areas at that particular moment in time.

## 6.7 The data collection method - semi structured interviews

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this research aims to explore only the opinions, beliefs, and feelings of a group of Chinese top-up students when they went through their one-year top-up programme study in Britain, including the reasons behind the change of their perceptions. In other words, it is not the intention of this research to evaluate the perceived views of these students against the reality or truth. In this situation, this research used one method of data collection, namely semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews are face-to-face interviews, and are used for gaining an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon or individuals being researched (Jamshed, 2014). While conducting semi-structured interviews, the participants are asked some predefined open-ended questions, the researcher is in the control position and steers the conversations to the pre-set themes. However, the participants are encouraged and are provided with the freedom to talk freely around these themes (Merriam, 2014). As a result, additional questions often emerge from the conversations.

Semi-structured interviews are felt more appropriate for this research mainly because this type of interview is considered particularly useful in not only “exploring the views of a person towards something”, but also in providing the opportunity for the researcher to gain a profound understanding of these views (Kvale, 1996; Van Teijlingen, 2014:20). In order to describe the personal stories of this group of Chinese top-up students in the format of written portraits, it is important for the researcher to capture and understand the meaning of the feelings and viewpoints of the participants first. Because the researcher developed and maintained a trust relationship with the participants through the data collection process, the semi-structured interviews conducted at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages seemed to have achieved this purpose, as the participants appeared to have disclosed their thoughts and

feelings frankly and without any hesitation (see chapter five and eleven for further details).

### 6.7.1 The interview schedule and procedure

During the data collection period, the participants were interviewed three times. These interviews were pre-planned and took place at the three key transition stages (moving in, moving through and moving out) throughout their study in this UK institution during the academic year 2015 -16.

The initial idea was to conduct the moving in interviews in China, since the purpose was to explore mainly the personal experiences of the Chinese top-up students, and the related surrounding contexts when they were studying in their home institution. However, due to the geographical distance between the participants in China (different provinces and home cities), and the time constraints for travelling, the moving in interviews actually took place in the UK soon after their arrival. The moving through interviews took place between the end of the first semester and the start of the second semester. At the time, the participants were half way through their top-up programme. The moving out interviews were carried out at the end of the second semester, when the top-up programme was nearly finished.

Each interview was around one and a half hours in duration and took place at a location where the participants felt most comfortable with, such as his or her university accommodation or a seminar room on campus. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, so that the participants could easily express what they wanted to say. This also created a nice and relaxing atmosphere for the participants. At the start of the interviews, the participants were provided with a brief explanation of the research, also their rights and responsibilities as a research participant. Permission was also asked and granted each time, to allow the researcher to record the interview with a digital voice recorder.

### 6.7.1.1 The impact interviews

In addition to the moving in, moving through and moving out interviews, the researcher also conducted additional impact interviews with the participants at around August 2017, a year after these students had completed their top-up programme. The main purpose of the impact interviews was to explore the effectiveness of the portrait methodology, and also whether and to what extent this methodology had helped the participants develop their sustainability during their time in this UK institution. Because the majority of participants had already left the host city, the impact interviews were carried out using the video function of WeChat (a Chinese social media platform, that is similar to Facebook). This platform was used throughout the data collection process to keep the communications with the participants. Each interview was about 30 minutes.

<b>The transition stage</b>	<b>The interview time</b>
Moving in	June, July, August 2015
Moving through	February 2016
Moving out	May 2016
Impact interviews	August 2017

Table 6.2 The interview schedules

The impact interviews weren't planned beforehand. However, as the research progressed, they were felt necessary, and also valuable for this research, as the moving in, moving through and moving out portraits produced didn't show the level of individuality this research had initially anticipated due to the fact that the participants were young, inexperienced and had no previous working experience. In addition, because this research is interested in the perceived views of the participants, and collected data only through the semi-structured interviews, the impact interviews appeared to be a valuable way of increasing the trustworthiness of the data, and hence the findings of the research. For these reasons, future



research adopting the portrait methodology to explore the transition of international top-up students should consider extending the existing three stages and incorporate the impact interviews as the fourth stage. Please see chapter twelve for further discussion of this issue.

The delay of a year in interviewing the participants seemed to have both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, since the participants had fully completed this transition process and received their final degree results, they were in a better position to think and reflect on their personal experiences in this study abroad year, particularly, whether and how taking part in this research had impacted their development and sustainability.

On the other hand, because there was one-year gap between the moving out and the impact interviews, and the participants had already moved on to the next chapter in their life (either studying for a master's degree or starting a new job), it was likely that they had forgotten what they had said in the previous interviews (moving in, moving through and moving out). In order to help them refresh their memory, the portraits and interview transcripts were sent back to the participants again via email, alongside the impact interview questions before the start of the interviews. The contribution and the impact of the portrait methodology will be discussed in detail in chapter eleven and twelve.

## 6.7.2 The interview questions

The pre-designed interview questions were derived from the literature examined in the previous chapters (chapters two to four), and included the cultural, economic and educational contexts and motivations for study abroad; the personal challenges of Chinese international students identified in current literature and their transition pattern.

Questions asked in the moving in interviews largely focused on gaining background information, that is, the previous experiences of Chinese top-up students in their home institution in China. The moving through and moving out interview questions explored the challenges they were facing and how the

participants dealt with the academic and social situation they were in when they were half way through and at the end of the journey. All predefined questions are listed in the table below. A detailed explanation of the individual questions is provided in appendices (3-5).

<p><b>The moving in interviews</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Now you have arrived in the UK for over a week, how do you feel?</li> <li>2. What things are you pleased about (e.g., the city, the country, the institution, the pre-session course, and others)? And what things are you disappointed about (e.g., the city, the country, the institution, the pre-session course, and others)?</li> <li>3. What are your main worries at present? And how are you going to manage them?</li> <li>4. What are the main challenges you are facing now?</li> <li>5. What are your expectations of this one-year top-up programme?</li> <li>6. Are there any major differences between the reality and your expectations?</li> <li>7. What prompted you to study a top-up programme in this UK institution?</li> <li>8. How much did you know about the top-up programme and the UK institution before leaving China? Have you conducted any research beforehand?</li> <li>9. Can you describe your feelings towards your experience in your Chinese university?</li> <li>10. Do you have any plans for your studies in this UK institution?</li> <li>11. Do you have plans for the future after you complete the top-up programme?</li> <li>12. What is your English level (e.g., listening, speaking, reading and writing)?</li> <li>13. Do you understand the concept of the U curve model? Do you think your current personal experience is following this U-shaped pattern?</li> </ol>
<p><b>The moving through interviews</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Now you are halfway through the top-up programme, how do you feel?</li> <li>2. Are your expectations met? Can you give me examples of things that are very different from what you had imagined?</li> <li>3. What experiences so far in Britain have had the most impact on you and why?</li> <li>4. What do you find the most satisfying and/or disappointing so far in this semester?</li> <li>5. Compared with the teaching approaches in China, what things are the same? And what things are different?</li> <li>6. What do you do in your spare time in this institution?</li> <li>7. Do you have any difficulties dealing with non-Chinese students, both inside and outside the classroom? (if so, what are they? if not, describe how you are dealing with them)</li> <li>8. Would you still come to this institution if you were given an opportunity to choose again?</li> <li>9. When facing difficulties and problems, how and what do you do to cope with them?</li> <li>10. What has been your most interesting/enjoyable experience so far?</li> <li>11. Whether and how your Chinese university experience has helped you adapt to the academic environment in the UK?</li> <li>12. What are the main challenges you are facing at present in relation to your academic and social development?</li> <li>13. What are your main worries?</li> </ol>

	<p>14. What are your main achievements this semester?</p> <p>15. Looking back at your experience in the first semester, do you think your transition experience at this stage has followed this U-shaped pattern?</p>
<p><b>The moving out interviews</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Now you have almost completed your top-up programme, is your overall experience in this UK institution positive or disappointing?</li> <li>2. What are the important things you have learnt from this study abroad experience?</li> <li>3. What impacts will they (the important things) have on your future development (e.g., personal/further studies/careers)?</li> <li>4. What are the most memorable experiences and/or lessons you have in this year? Can you provide me with three examples?</li> <li>5. What have been the main challenges and difficulties you face during this academic year?</li> <li>6. How did you deal with them? And have you sorted them out yet?</li> <li>7. What are the benefits/advantages of this top-up programme?</li> <li>8. What have been your main worries? And how have you managed them?</li> <li>9. Did they have any impact on your study and life on campus?</li> <li>10. What are your main achievements in your academic and social development?</li> <li>11. What could have been improved to help you settle in and study in this institution better?</li> <li>12. Looking back your experience in the second semester, do you think your transition experience at this stage has followed this U-shaped pattern?</li> </ol>

Table 6.3 Pre-defined interview questions

<p><b>The impact interviews</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Several individualized questions from the individual portraits <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) When I interviewed you last time, you mentioned that your dad wanted you to go to Canada to study a master's degree, so that the whole family could potentially relocate to Canada in the future. You said that you had applied to a few UK institutions already, but hadn't yet made any contacts with Canadian universities. So what is your plan now?</li> <li>b) You mentioned that you grew fond of the host city, and felt very reluctant to leave at the end of the study. Now you have left Britain for a year and have had time to think and reflect on your personal experience in Britain, how do you feel about this one-year study abroad experience? And what feeling currently do you have towards the city and the country?</li> <li>c) How were your final degree results? Did they meet your expectations?</li> <li>d) Have you had any plans for your future career? And what are you hoping to gain from your future career?</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. What are your main memories from this top-up year?</li> <li>3. You attended the interviews and read the portraits. Did the overall process have any effect on you?</li> <li>4. Which had the greater impact on you: the interviews, reading the transcripts or portraits?</li> </ol>
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	5. As a result of doing this research with me, did it change the way you did things? As a result of doing this research with me, did it change the way you felt about things?
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Table 6.4 The impact interview questions

In addition to those predefined, some additional important questions that had emerged from the previous interviews and portraits were added to the moving through and moving out interviews. For example, after transcribing the moving in interviews, the researcher noticed that almost all participants had already decided or were planning to study a master’s degree right after the top-up programme, either in Britain or an immigration country, such as Australia or Canada. Only a few participants explained the reasons or motivation for doing so, consequently, new questions such as *“why are you interested in studying a master’s degree after completing the top-up programme”*, and *“what is your current situation relating to the application procedure”* were added to the second interviews.

These questions were designed to explore specifically why studying a postgraduate degree was such a popular choice for the participants, also, whether their plan remained the same after they had a proper contact with the British learning and teaching environment and system. In addition, what was the impact on their personal experiences at the moving through and moving out stages. All additional questions asked in the second and third interviews are listed in the table below. The explanation and justification for using these questions are provided in appendices 4 and 5.

<b>Moving through interviews</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why are you interested in studying a master’s degree after completing the top-up programme?</li> <li>2. What is your current situation relating to the master’s application procedure?</li> <li>3. Do you understand British undergraduate degree classification?</li> <li>4. You mentioned in the previous interview that you made little preparation for the forthcoming top-up programme, or didn’t know how and where to find the related information. Does it have any impact on your current study?</li> </ol>
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<b>Moving out interviews</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How are you getting on with the home and other non-Chinese students in the second semester?</li> <li>2. Why did you find it so hard to write academic assignments in Britain?</li> <li>3. How are you coping with it in the second semester?</li> </ol>
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Table 6.5 Additional questions added to the second and third interview schedules

## 6.8 Data analysis and interpretation

It is well known that qualitative research tends to generate large amounts of data. The purpose of data analysis therefore is to systematically organize, manage and make sense of the data collected to produce meaningful explanations, understandings and interpretations of people or situation investigated (Taylor & Gibbs, 2010; Harding, 2013). When conducting research, data analysis happens at the same time as when the data collection process starts, and requires the researcher to move back and forth regularly between the different steps.

This was particularly the case for this research, as it was cross-sectional and longitudinal in nature. The researcher, for example, when writing the portraits for the participants, needed to not only analyse and synthesize the key points which emerged in the interviews at each key transition stage (moving in, moving through and moving out), but also went backward and forward through all three stages to explore how the perceptions of the participants changed, and how their personal experiences changed.

### 6.8.1 Data transcription

The section above (6.6) explained how the data were collected in this research. The raw data were comprised of mainly the audio recordings of the interviews. Including the 12 impact interviews, there were in total 48-recorded audios.

Data transcription is the first step of data analysis in qualitative research (Bailey, 2008). Through transcribing the audio or video data, reading and re-reading the transcripts, a researcher becomes more familiar with the data collected. In this

research, data transcription took place repeatedly at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages because the participants were interviewed three times through the year. The impact interviews were transcribed immediately after the WeChat interviews were completed. As agreed in the trust documents given to all participants, the researcher transcribed all audio recordings by herself. This was mainly for the consideration of maintaining trust, and also data privacy and anonymity. As all interviews were conducted in Chinese, they were transcribed in Chinese as well.

In order to improve the accuracy of the transcriptions, the researcher followed a “listening-transcribing-checking” procedure (Bailey, 2008; Kelly et al., 2010). For instance, before she started to transcribe, the researcher listened to the audio recording first to refresh memory and develop an overview of the interview. She then used a digital transcription software - Express Scribe to transcribe. This software enabled the researcher to control the audio playback speed using keyboard shortcut keys, and subsequently helped improve transcription efficiency. After the transcription, the researcher checked the accuracy of each transcript by listening to the audio again whilst reading through the transcript. For the ease of data management and the purpose of data security, all interview transcripts were saved electronically in a password protected cloud based storage. At the end of data transcription stage, there were 48 transcripts in total and approx. 203,500 words.

## 6.8.2 First cycle coding and portrait writing

First cycle coding is the initial stage of coding, and is designed to reduce the size of the data without losing the “richness, the depth and context” of it (Seers, 2012:2; Bengtsson, 2016). This process in this research started as soon as data transcription was completed at each transition stage. During the first cycle coding, portrait writing took place simultaneously. This was because the participants, as explained in the previous chapter, needed to be able to read their portraits and give feedback to the researcher prior to the start of the next set of interviews. The

key areas identified in each interview transcript were essential for forming the structure and the main storyline of an individual portrait.

For the reasons mentioned above, it was critical for the researcher to familiarize herself with “the depth and breath” of the data (Nowell et al., 2017:5). Since she transcribed all interviews herself, the researcher had already developed an initial familiarity with the interview transcripts at the data transcription stage. During the first cycle coding, the researcher firstly went through the memos she had written immediately after the interviews, and then began to annotate the transcripts. This included highlighting the key and important areas or factors that had emerged; assigning some initial codes, and writing down her initial thoughts, self-reflections, and potential questions that might need to be asked in the next stage interviews (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Green et al., 2007).

For the purpose of organizing and managing the data effectively, the researcher opted for using an iPad app, office 365 (Word) to carry out the first cycle coding electronically. The combination of the special ink tools of the app and the iPad pencil made it much easier to annotate directly onto the word documents and colour code different text sections electronically. By doing so, the researcher was also able to see the highlighted areas and comments after she imported the data into NVivo at a later stage.

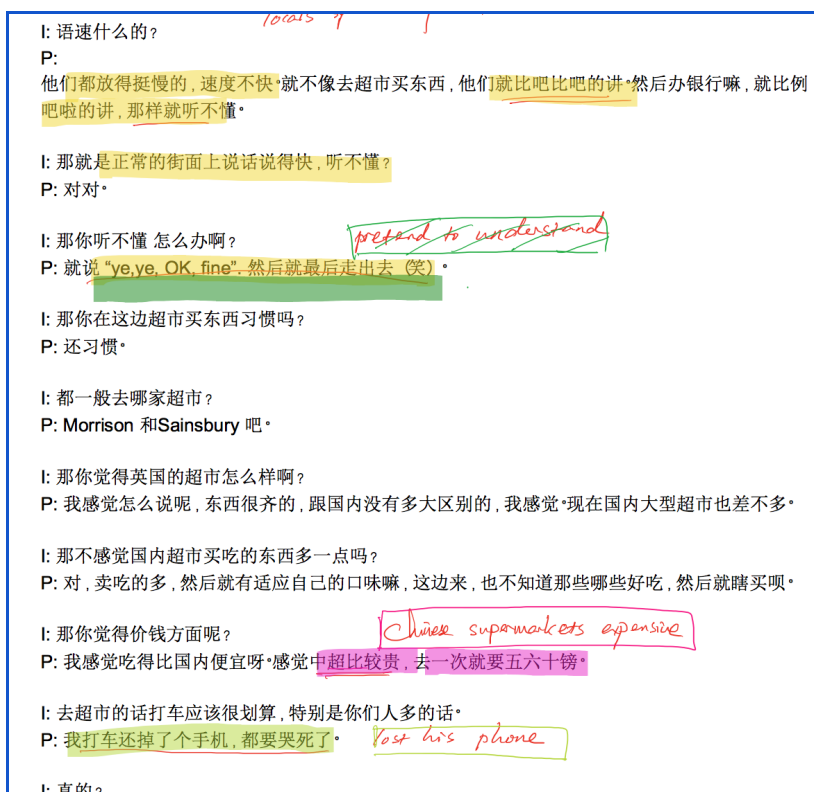


Figure. 6.1 A screenshot of the first cycle coding using the Microsoft 365 (Word)

Once the key areas were identified, the researcher began to write the portraits. Since she didn't have previous experiences in this area, it took the researcher a much longer time to write the first three portraits. The detailed reflection on writing portraits is offered in chapter twelve, but the main challenges the researcher experienced are summarized as follows: 1) the portrait format and structure: that is, how best to capture and represent the individual personal experience in a portrait and 2) language difficulties. The researcher sometimes found it very challenging to keep the original meaning when translating the direct quotes of the participants from Chinese to English.

After each portrait was created, the researcher then checked the content thoroughly against the transcript, and made any amendments wherever they were needed. Due to the weak language skills of the participants, the researcher translated the portraits into Chinese before sending them to the participants for comments and feedback. Almost all participants were happy with their portraits, and few changes were made as the result (see chapter eleven for further details).



Nevertheless, the moving out portraits of the participants were updated at a later stage based on the interview transcripts of the impact interviews, and a section was added specifically to outline whether and to what extent had the portraits helped their development and sustainability in this year through participating in this research.

Since there were 12 interviews in each key transition stage (moving in, moving through and moving out), 36 portraits were produced in this research, and each portrait was approx. 3,500 words. A copy of the moving in, moving through and moving out portraits of one participant is provided in appendix 1.

### 6.8.3 Second cycle coding and theme identification

The second cycle coding started after all portraits were produced, and the purpose was to condense the data further by grouping the initial summaries and codes into categories, and then themes (Miles et al., 2014; Richards & Hemphill, 2018). During this process, the researcher chose to use NVivo - a popular and well-known qualitative data analysis software, mainly because this software enabled the researcher to organize, manage and analyse all data in one location. The software was also user friendly and very easy to use, and some of the built-in features of NVivo proved to be very helpful (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013), for example, sources and references enabled the researcher to view the frequency and patterns in relation to the key words and areas she defined within an individual transcript or portrait, and also among all data of a particular stage. The text search or word frequency query allowed the researcher to explore whether certain areas and key words that she might have missed in the first cycle coding could be used as codes. In addition, the memo feature was convenient to record thoughts and reflections and store them in the same location as the data.

Second cycle coding in this research was undertaken initially by stage. The researcher worked on the interview transcripts and the portraits of the moving in stage first and then moved onto the moving through and moving out stages. After this, the researcher went through the key categories identified across all three

transition stages. To start with, the researcher uploaded all interview transcripts, portraits and memos into NVivo. Once this was done, the researcher began to create nodes (categories) and sub nodes (sub-categories) based on the annotations made at the first cycle coding. During this process, the researcher kept going back to the data and asked herself questions such as “what are the relations between the nodes I created”? “what kind of the story emerged from the data?” And “how can the data help answer the main and sub questions” (Gibson & Brown, 2009)? By doing so, the researcher was getting much more familiar with the data, which subsequently helped group and cluster the nodes into themes. An example of the nodes developed for the moving in stage is presented below:

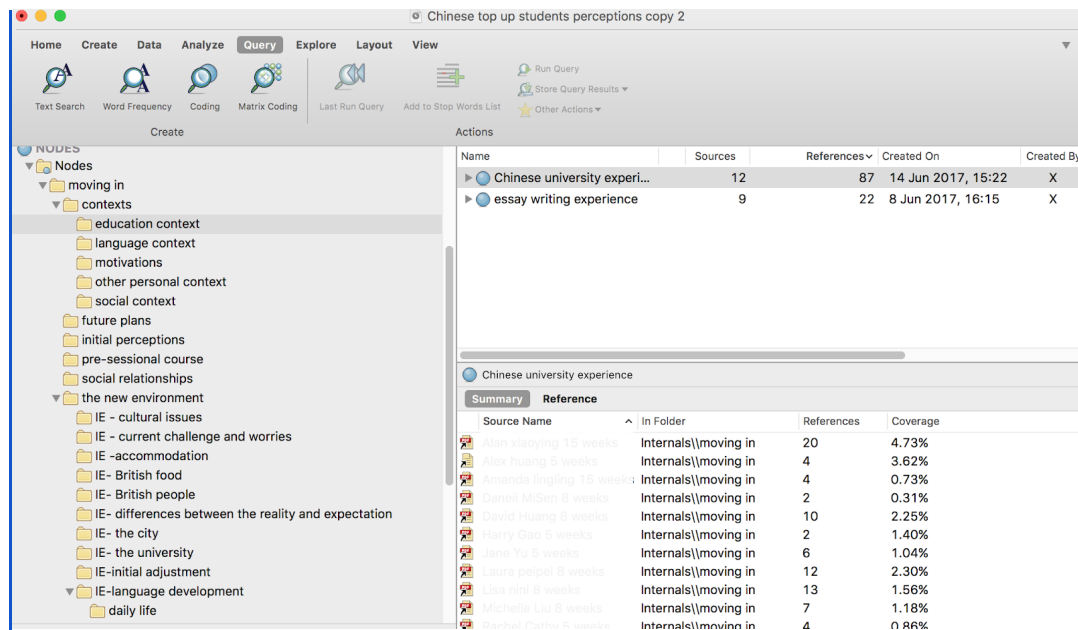


Figure. 6.2 A screenshot of the second cycle coding using NVivo.

Based on the nodes and sub nodes created, the researcher was then able to develop themes in each transition stage, and also an understanding of the key story the data were trying to show the moving in, moving through and moving out stages. The details in relation to the findings and data analysis are provided in chapters seven, eight and nine. A quick summary of the main story of this research and the key theme in each stage is presented below.

<b>The main story</b>	A group of young and inexperienced Chinese students who weren't very academically gifted, experienced a very difficult time when they came to study a one-year top-up programme in a UK institution.
<b>Moving in</b>	Before leaving China, the participants were underprepared academically and socially at both the personal and institutional levels. As a result, these students were put in a totally strange situation after they arrived in the UK, which they didn't really understand and didn't know how to cope with.
<b>Moving through</b>	The participants began to experience many unexpected challenges academically and socially. Because they weren't supported sufficiently and appropriately by the UK institution, these Chinese top-up students were unable to cope with their academic and social situation effectively.
<b>Moving out</b>	At the final stage of their transition, the participants were still unable to manage their academic and social situation even though they had studied and lived in the UK for nearly a year. A lack of adequate support at the institutional level was the main reason for the situation these students were in.

Table 6.6 A quick summary of the main story of this research and the key theme in each stage

## 6.9 Summary

Based on the methodological approach adopted - a variation of the portrait methodology, this chapter focused on explaining how this study was conducted. 12 participants were selected using a combination of convenience, snowball and opportunity sampling techniques. There was an element of convenience in this research, since it was conducted in the academic school where the researcher was working. Because the researcher had no direct personal or academic contacts with the Chinese top-up students of this particular cohort, all 12 participants were recruited or recommended either by the pilot participants or the existing research participants.

The next two sections of this chapter focused on how the data were collected in this research, including the data collection stages, and the data collection method adopted. Unlike other qualitative research, this study only used semi-structured interviews to collect data. The main reason was that this research was only interested in understanding one dimension of the phenomenon researched, that is, the viewpoints the participants shared with the researcher. Semi-structured

interviews therefore enabled the researcher to develop the level of understanding needed to produce the portraits of the participants at a later stage.

The final section emphasized how the data were analysed and interpreted in this research. This process happened alongside the data collection, and included three stages. Firstly, the researcher transcribed the recorded audio interviews. For the purpose of building and maintaining trust, and data privacy, the transcription was carried out entirely by the researcher. After the interview transcripts were ready, the researcher started the first cycle coding, and its purpose was to identify the distinct concepts or areas emerged in the transcripts. Portrait writing also took place during this process, as the portraits needed to be sent to the participants for comments before the start of the next interview. The key areas identified during first coding were essential for structuring the content of a portrait. The final stage was second cycle coding. The researcher used NVivo to help analyse the data, which included the interview transcripts, the portraits and the memos. The main purpose of this process was to categorize the areas and concepts identified in first coding and generate themes.

The next chapter is the first part of the findings chapters, and will present the findings at the moving in stage.

# Chapter Seven: The participants' perceptions of their academic and social development at the moving in stage

## 7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the actual research design of the study, such as the sample size, sampling strategies, and the data collection method used. It also provided details on how the data were analysed and interpreted.

This chapter is the first findings chapter and reports the perceptions and experiences of the participants at the moving in stage. All quotations in this chapter are taken from the portraits of the participants. It consists of five sections. It begins with exploring the transition experiences of the participants at the moving in stage, and then moves onto providing an overview of the problems, and challenges the participants experience at this stage, and also their coping strategies. This is because the findings in these areas are interlinked closely with the level of preparations the participants had before they arrived in Britain, and will help understand how the perceptions of the participants developed at the moving in stage. The chapter finishes with describing and discussing the language, academic and social preparations of the participants at the personal and institutional levels before their departure.

## 7.2 An overview of the transition experiences and perceptions of the participants

The data suggests that the initial transition experiences of most participants (10 out of 12) seemed to have followed the U curve model, as they were experiencing the honeymoon stage as soon as they arrived in Britain. For the majority of participants (10 out of 12), this was the first time that they had come to Britain or

Europe, and were going to live independently for a long period of time. They appeared to be full of excitement and have had a great first impression of the country and the host country nationals. Because everything was new and different from what they had experienced in China, most participants reported that they were curious, and were very keen to explore the host city and the surrounding areas.

*We shopped around the city as soon as we arrived.... We have already been to the cities near us. Me and my friends are planning to go to London this weekend. I can't wait. (Michelle)*

*When I first arrived in Britain, everything was feeling great, and I had a really good mood. I said to myself that 'I am finally here!'. (Amanda)*

In contrast, two participants didn't go through the honeymoon stage. For example, Rachel said that she experienced a feeling of the crisis first. Even though she was also excited and looking forward to studying abroad beforehand, Rachel became upset and depressed almost straightaway when she arrived in Britain. Her reaction wasn't necessarily personality related, but appeared to be more context specific. For example, Rachel grew up in a large family. She was living with not only her own family, but also her grandparents, and her uncle's family together. Therefore, she was always surrounded by others.

So, Rachel remarked that she was feeling very lonely in Britain as she was allocated to a single room with an en-suite bathroom. This means that the residents didn't tend to see each other much apart from the time when they were cooking in the communal kitchen. Therefore, the change from the noisy and crowded environment to a lonely and quiet environment in this total strange country was a real physical shock. As Rachel recalled that *"I couldn't eat and sleep properly for the first three days, and was crying every night"*.

As with Rachel, Daniel believed that he didn't experience the honeymoon stage either. For instance, he said that he was looking forward to coming to Britain, but didn't feel as excited as others. In fact, Daniel described his entire transition

experience in Britain “*like a straight line*”. The details in relation to his transition experience are provided in chapter nine.

Even though they were feeling excited and couldn't wait to start this new life in Britain, the majority of participants, as mentioned below, seemed to take the same action at the moving in stage - they made little preparations for both their academic and social development before leaving China. Besides, they perceived that it would be fairly easy for them to gain excellent academic results, and graduate from this UK institution with a good degree, based on the incomplete or incorrect information provided by the University agents in China in relation to the graduation rate and results of the previous cohort.

### 7.3 The problems, challenges, and coping strategies

At the moving in stage, the main challenge that the participants were facing, as the data indicates, was that they were underprepared academically and socially at the personal and institutional levels while they were studying in their home institution in China. For example, the language skills of these Chinese top-up students were weak. Academically there was a lack of fundamental knowledge and information in the areas such as academic culture, academic writing, and independent learning skills. In addition, socially, the participants didn't seem to have gained the essential social skills and cultural knowledge they needed to integrate into the new society.

Consequently, when they arrived in Britain, the participants felt that they were put in a strange environment and situation, which they weren't prepared for, and this included the challenges and difficulties they were going to face in this one-year study. In this context, the participants didn't seem to have considered or prepared any effective coping strategies.

*I haven't made any plans [for my studies]. To be honest I am not a hard working person and have never been a high achiever in school. (Michelle)*

*It is possible that I may face some challenges when the new semester starts, for example, our tutors may speak too fast. However, I haven't worked out any strategies, I will wait and see. (Daniel)*

This finding seems to support what has been identified already in the literature. For instance, Chinese students by and large rarely make plans in this area before travelling, and are often put in a position to work out some solutions quickly when they are encountering the problems (Chou, et al., 2011; Madden-Dent & Laden, 2016). However, these “ad hoc plans” tend to be more passive and maladaptive (for example, distancing, confronting, and withdrawing), hence are increasing their stress level and are having a negative impact on their transition and adjustment (Chou et al., 2011; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Nevertheless, research suggests that positive coping strategies can help reduce the acculturative stress international students experience (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Szabo et al, 2016).

## 7.4 The global factor - language skills

### 7.4.1 At the personal level

#### 7.4.1.1 For general English skills

The first year of the HND and the international programme that the participants studied was dedicated specifically to language training, and covered all four language skills, that is, listening, speaking, reading and writing. All participants said that they had one speaking class on a weekly basis to practise their speaking skills. Apart from Alan, it appeared that the speaking classes of the rest of the participants were delivered by a native English speaker. In contrast, for all participants, the classes on reading and writing skills, as they said, were taught entirely by Chinese tutors.

Most participants (9 of 12) admitted that they wasted time and weren't interested in studying English. For example, they didn't make use of the most of the



opportunities to practice speaking skills, and rarely had interactions with their language tutors.

*Most of us hardly had any communications with our language tutor. I was actually feeling quite sympathetic for him. He was talking in front of the class, but we were all busy playing on our mobile phone. (Sophie)*

*Nobody took the initiative to even try to have a conversation with our language tutor. Most of the time we just sat in the classroom daydreaming when he was talking, or watching the films or videos he played. (Lisa)*

The lack of interest in language learning partially appeared to be due to the negative impact of the stressful life they had in senior high school. At the time, these participants reported that they had to work very hard constantly for three years to prepare for the gaokao:

*Because we just got out of the hard life in school, the burden is off, and life suddenly becomes so easy and relaxing. (Michelle)*

*We were feeling really tired during the three years in secondary school, I just wanted to enjoy life and not to worry about my studies. (Daniel)*

Some participants also felt that the negative peer influence and study atmosphere in the classroom were the additional reasons for their lack of engagement.

*Nobody really cared about studies, and it was quite common for us to skip classes. All we were interested and talked about was where to go out and eat and how to entertain ourselves. (Lisa)*

*[For example] when we were in year one, the study environment was pretty bad. Nobody wanted to study. Many students came from rich families and what we mainly talked about at the time was where to eat after classes. (Rachel)*

In comparison, three participants seemed to have studied better than others. For Harry, it was largely because “*I was the student rep at the time*”, and needed to demonstrate a good example to others. For Alex and Jane, it was because “*I was really keen to study abroad, and wanted to make the transition as smooth as possible*”. Even so, both said that they were struggling with English grammar and didn’t appear to have improved their vocabulary level sufficiently.

*English grammar is indeed one of my main worries. When I was in China, I memorized all different types of verbs, nouns, etc, but I don't truly understand how to use them properly. (Laura)*

*I feel that I am weak in English grammar. Sometimes I don't even notice when I make grammar mistakes. Besides, I think I don't have enough vocabulary. I used to memorize 50 new words each day for a period of time but didn't manage to continue. (Alex)*

The problems Alex and Jane indicated seemed to support the view identified in existing literature (see chapter three for further details), and also linked closely to the teaching approach and teaching pedagogy of their Chinese tutors. The details will be covered in the section below.

#### 7.4.1.2 For the IELTS test

International students who apply to study in this UK institution are required to take an internationally recognized language proficiency test. The minimum entry score for those taking the IELTS test is 6. All participants took an IELTS test, and many of them had multiple attempts, however, none of them achieved a score of 6. The best result among them was 5.5.

<b>IELTS test result</b>	<b>Participants</b>
4.5	Alan; Amanda; Sophie
5	Daniel; David; Laura; Lisa; Michelle
5.5	Alex; Harry; Jane; Rachel

Table 7.1 The IELTS result of the participants

This was mainly due to the fact that the general English abilities of most participants were weak, since they said that they didn't make a good effort in this area when they studied in their home institution. Additionally, it was related to how they were trained in the intensive IELTS training course they received. While they were studying in their home institution, 10 out of 12 participants reported that they attended an external IELTS preparatory course in a summer or winter

holiday, and the standard duration of this type of course is “around approximately 20 days” (Lisa).

Most of these participants however didn't have a high opinion of the course they attended. For instance, Sophie (IELTS 4.5) remarked, “*I think the training classes offered in China aren't very good. I attended one, which was supposed to be one of the best in the country. However, I don't think it was that helpful, otherwise I wouldn't have achieved such low score*”. And the main reason, as suggested by the participants, was that this type of course focused heavily on how to pass an IELTS test. As a result, it didn't help them improve their language skills, and didn't truly reflect their language proficiency.

*The IELTS training we had mainly taught us test skills and how to achieve the score needed. But it provided no help in terms of improving our real language skills. (Jane, IELTS 5.5)*

*Even though I took the IELTS test, and got a 5, my actual language abilities are very poor. For example, I can speak individual English words, but am unable to speak a complete sentence. (Michelle, IELTS 5)*

## 7.4.2 At the institutional level

The data indicate that the actual pre-departure language preparations at the institutional level were provided only by the home institution of the participants. In addition to providing the language course in year one, the participants said that the subject discipline related teaching in year two and the final year was delivered using a combination of Chinese and English. Furthermore, six participants who studied in the same home institution in China (CU3) reported that they were put on a compulsory IELTS training course throughout their three-year studies.

### 7.4.2.1 The year one language training

9 out of 12 participants indicated clearly that this whole year training wasn't particularly useful, and didn't help them improve their language skills. In their opinion, the ineffectiveness of the training was mainly the result of the teaching style and the content of the language course. For instance, there were hardly any

interactions in class between them and their tutor, and the teaching and learning activities were designed mainly to test their memorization.

*We didn't come in contact with any western way of thinking [in our speaking classes].....for example, we didn't have group discussions, or group work. Many of my friends who were taught by foreign tutors, including those who studied in a professional language training centre, had a similar feeling. This might be because they had been teaching in China for a while, and are influenced by the Chinese way of teaching. (David, international programme)*

*The training in year one was completely useless. The content was very broad and shallow. It didn't cover anything particularly useful. In my opinion, it should be reduced to one semester only, and with a target focus on our IELTS test. (Rachel, HND)*

#### 7.4.2.2 About the compulsory IELTS training

6 out of 12 participants received an in-house IELTS training while they were studying their international programmes in CU3. In the first two years, the training was delivered by the tutors of the Institution, however, in their final year it was provided by some external IELTS training experts, who were invited by the Institution. Most of these participants felt that the final year training was more helpful than the first two years mainly in terms of the exam techniques.

*We only came to truly understand IELTS tests in our final year, especially in relation to the reading test. Our own tutors in the first two years never taught us how to answer the questions, and only asked us to explain the meaning of the articles. However, the tutors that came from the training centre taught us the techniques, so that we know what to do when facing certain types of questions. (Laura)*

*The final year paid more attention to the exam skills. For example, we were taught how to improve our reading speed in test. Also, what we should do if we were unable to answer the questions in the actual exam. (Jane)*

#### 7.4.2.3 About the bilingual teaching

In all three Chinese institutions (CU1, CU2 and CU3), teaching in year two and three seemed to have focused on the participants' chosen field of study, and some modules were supposed to be delivered in English and use English

textbooks. However, the reality was very different, because it appeared that some tutors didn't follow the curriculum properly, as Alan remarked, "*although we had English textbooks, the so called teaching in English was actually Chinese teaching with a few English words*".

Some participants reported that their tutors did deliver some of the modules in English, however, most of them didn't feel it particularly helpful in terms of improving their language skills, partially because of their weak language foundation.

*Teaching the modules in English, in my opinion, wasn't helpful at all. Because our language skills were very poor, we couldn't understand what the tutor said hence were unable to keep up with him. (David, international programme)*

*Many modules we studied, such as Accounting, Insurance, and Economics used English textbooks and were taught pretty much in English. The English teaching wasn't helpful at all, because we couldn't understand, and had no idea about what we were taught. (Rachel, HND programme)*

In addition, the participants commented that they weren't encouraged to develop their subject discipline vocabulary and reading competency, and there was no dedicated help in this area either, in spite of the fact they were given English textbooks as teaching and reading resources.

*It was extremely challenging to read the English textbooks. There were so many new vocabulary....but [luckily] we didn't need to read them. Tutors normally provided Chinese translations.... In revisions, we were given exam answers. One just needed to memorize these English words. (Sophie, international programmes)*

*We were asked to buy textbooks, but hardly read them. I would say during this three-year period, we probably used less than 10% of each book..... when I threw them away at the end of the programme, they were all still very new. (Lisa, HND)*

## 7.5 Academic preparations

### 7.5.1 At the personal level

#### 7.5.1.1 Academic culture

The actual preparations of the participants were limited to the areas such as the ranking of this UK institution, and the graduate rate of the Chinese top-up students from the previous cohort, since most participants said that they were planning to study a master's degree in a much better UK institution after completing their top-up programme.

*The other university I had in mind was better and its ranking was higher than this University. However, I worried that it was going to be much harder for me to graduate from that university since the requirements would be tougher than this University. Besides, I would have to study a pre-session course for a much longer period of time than 8 weeks, and I wasn't very keen to do so. (David)*

*It appeared to me that the higher the University was ranked, the harder it would be for me to get in, because the entry requirements were much higher. I prefer to study the top-up degree in a very ordinary University like this one so that I stand a better chance to gain good degree results. (Daniel)*

Even though they aimed to achieve a 2.1 degree, over half of the participants didn't seem to understand the grading system used in Britain.

*What are the grades for getting a 2.1 degree? Is it equivalent to 70 or 80? And what is the passing grade? (Alex)*

*I didn't know anything about the British degree classification [when I was in China], and I only started to become familiar with it after I arrived in the UK. (Lisa)*

The majority of participants (9 out of 12) didn't appear to have conducted any additional research to gain the basic knowledge about their top-up programme, or the new education system.

*It is early days, we are still on the first phase of the pre-session course. So I haven't yet given much thought to the top-up programme. (Alan)*

*Studies aren't the no.1 priority in terms of studying abroad. For me, it is more important to experience the new life in Britain. [When the term starts], I will do what I need to do to [get through this year]. It doesn't matter whether I have the information beforehand. (Rachel)*

Three participants attempted to make some preparations, but it appeared that they were unsuccessful. For David, the main challenge was that “*I didn't really know where to find the information*”. Jane seemed to have experienced some technical difficulties due to the Internet security controls in China. She said that “*the university website just didn't load. Sometimes when I managed to open it, the connection was very poor and I could hardly see the web content*”. Alex was trying to get hold of some reading lists so that “*I could take the Chinese version of these books*”. However, she said, “*the university agent didn't seem to have the information*”.

#### 7.5.1.2 Academic writing

Six participants who studied HND programmes in their home institutions (CU1 and CU2) reported that they had some experience writing assignments in English, since academic assignments were used as one of the main assessment methods in these two institutions.

As Daniel explained that “*depending on the subject area one was studying, each assignment required us to combine the knowledge learnt on all modules in one academic year. For example, those I wrote were related to Accounting*”. And Rachel reported that during their three-year studies, she “*wrote three assignments in total*”, and each assignment was approx. 5,000 words. Through their writing practice, these participants said that they had learnt briefly on how to conduct the basic academic research. However, it seemed to be done mainly through the Internet, and these participants mentioned that they researched predominantly on Chinese websites. Additionally, instead of paraphrasing what they found online, the participants said that they were more used to copying and pasting the content directly without providing references.

*The websites we used were all in Chinese..... In order to write the assignments, one needed to have some ideas first and follow his ideas to write. We copied most of the content off the Internet. (Alan)*

*When we wrote the assignments in China, pretty much all content came from the Internet. We only made some minor changes to it (Lisa)*

Even though they hadn't yet started writing assignments, the writing experience these participants had previously in China seemed to have helped boost their confidence in dealing with the writing challenges they were about to encounter in this UK institution.

*A good thing about this HND programme was that we had the opportunity to write many assignments. Students from other Chinese universities either didn't have the same level of contact [with assignment writing] or wrote much less than us. Through this training, we have developed some level of writing skills, and can at least write an assignment of several thousands of words. (Harry)*

*At least I know what to do and how to do it when I am required to write an assignment. (Daniel)*

In contrast, the other six participants who studied an international programme in CU3 didn't seem to have any experience of academic writing, since they said that they were assessed only by written exams. Even though they knew that they would have to write assignments in Britain, these six participants didn't appear to have made any preparations in this area at the personal level. Based on what they described, their lack of preparation in academic writing was mainly due to the fact that their home institution didn't provide the opportunity.

*I knew that we would have to write assignments for the top-up programme when I was in China. However, I never trained myself to write one, as I paid more attention to the IELTS test and subject discipline knowledge. [This is because] we didn't need to write assignments. (Jane)*

*I knew we would need to write assignments in the near future in Britain. I didn't make any preparations for it when I was in China because I never wrote one, hence, never really thought about it. (Alex)*



### 7.5.1.3 Independent learning skills

The participants appeared to be unprepared in developing their independent learning skills at the personal level. For example, 8 out of 12 participants reported that they lacked intrinsic motivation to study, which seemed to be caused by a combination of reasons. Firstly, a couple of them weren't actually interested in studying abroad.

*I didn't want to study abroad, but was forced to make the choice, simply because my results of the National Exams were not good enough to study in a decent Chinese university. (David)*

Secondly, most of these participants commented that they weren't satisfied with the HND or international programme they studied, as they believed that this type of programme was only interested in making profit.

*Everything was expensive. [For example], the tuition fees were expensive, so were the accommodation and resit fees. The HND programme was very keen to get us to resit exams, because it could then charge us more money. (Michelle, HND)*

*I was worried that there would be a significant impact on my final results if I failed some modules. However, I came to realise that one could pass the modules anyway, as long as he or she was willing to pay. Therefore, it didn't matter whether you studied or whether you failed. (Alex, international programme)*

Thirdly, the lack of motivation was also the result of the teaching style and the assessment strategy adopted in these home institutions. Further details are provided in the section below. And finally, many participants didn't seem to have developed any time management skills, or have had any habit of being proactive with their study activities. For example, Michelle said, "nobody spent time to study at all. When we needed to hand in assignments, we just stayed up and wrote through the night. And that is it".

## 7.5.2 At the institutional level

### 7.5.2.1 Academic culture

The actual preparations at the institutional level seemed to be provided by the agents of the UK institution, who were Chinese and were based in China. The information about the academic culture, as the participants described, covered largely two areas: British undergraduate degree classification and the graduate rate of the Chinese top-up students who studied in this UK institution in the previous cohort. The former seemed to be offered only to the participants from CU1 and CU2, as the other 6 participants who studied in CU3 didn't appear to know anything in this area beforehand.

*The agents didn't explain to us what exactly British degree classification was, and I had no idea about it. We were only told that we should aim to get a 2.1 because it would be easier for us to apply for a master's degree in Britain later on. (Laura, CU3)*

*I knew the meaning of degree classification before coming to Britain. The agents provided fairly detailed information in this area. (Alan, CU2)*

*I understood British degree classification when I was in China. The agents told us. (Daniel, CU1)*

In addition, the information all participants received regarding the graduate rate sounded very positive. In fact, most participants said that this was one of the main reasons for them to choose to study in this particular UK institution, in spite of its low rank.

*I was told that everybody (Chinese top-up students) in this university graduated last year. Over 70% to 80% of them achieved a 2.2 degree. [Among them] over half received a 2.1 degree. (Alan)*

*The agents told us that it was going to be easy for us to gain a 2.1 degree in this University. It would then put us in a much better position when we apply for a postgraduate degree later on. (Sophie)*

But the participants said that they discovered later that what they were told in China was incorrect, and it was much more challenging and difficult to gain the degree results they aimed for. Further details in this area are offered in chapter eight and nine.

*My academic results in the home institution were regularly over 80. The agents all said that it would be quite simple and easy for me to gain a 2.1 degree in this UK institution. But I realised once the semester started that it is actually very challenging to reach the level of 2.1. Many of my friends have lowered their expectations to 2.2. (Jane)*

*I was told that it would be very easy to get a 2.1 degree in this UK university. That is why I planned to use this university as a stepping-stone to study a master's degree in a better UK university later on. However, after the top-up programme has started, I feel that things aren't as simple as I was told. In fact, I have to work extremely hard to even reach the 2.2 level. (Sophie).*

Nevertheless, it appears that the information about this UK institution relating to the future programmes (the pre-sessional course, and their top-up programme) wasn't included in these talks. For instance, the majority of participants indicated clearly that they didn't know what would be covered in the pre-sessional course.

*We knew that we would have to study a pre-sessional course first before starting the top-up programme. We had a vague idea that the course was designed to help us prepare for the future studies in this University. However, the agents didn't tell us in detail about exactly what would we study on this course. (David).*

*I thought the pre-sessional course would be very similar to the IELTS preparatory classes we attended. It was going to be just another language training course aiming at teaching us language skills. (Michelle)*

### 7.5.2.2 Academic writing

The UK institution didn't seem to have provided pre-arrival preparation in academic writing to the participants while they were studying in their home institution in China. As mentioned above, the participants reported that CU3 provided no academic training to their students, and hence those who came from this particular home institution were really worried about writing assignments in the UK institution.

*We are currently required to write one assignment for the pre-sessional course. Because I have never written one before, I do worry about it. (David)*

*We probably need to write quite a lot of assignments in this top-up year. But I have never written one before. I don't know what should I do? And where to start? (Sophie)*

Even though those coming from CU1 and CU2 received the training in academic writing, these participants said that their Chinese tutors were tolerant and had a low expectation of the writing standard and the participants' level of English.

*Because we were all Chinese, our tutors tended to understand our thoughts and ideas, and what we wrote [in English]. In addition, they weren't so strict with us about our English. (Michelle)*

*Our tutors were very tolerant, and weren't picking us up on English, because they knew our language skills weren't very good. (Alan)*

Besides, these participants said that they weren't given the opportunity to practice in conducting the thinking and planning independently, as they were required to follow the detailed instructions provided.

*Our tutors gave us help on almost everything, including how to write an outline, how to structure the assignment, what needed to be included in each section and where to find the resources needed..... for some key definitions we needed to include in our assignment, our tutors normally provide the Chinese translation. All we needed to do was to translate it into English. (Daniel)*

*The framework and structure provided by our tutors were in great detail. We weren't required to conduct intensive academic research ourselves, as long as the assignment met tutors' requirements.....we didn't pay much attention to academic research, at the time, it was all about completing the assignments following tutor's instructions. (Michelle)*

In addition, it appeared that even though they were taught that they needed to include references in their writing, these participants reported that they weren't provided with an explanation for the purpose, and also how to do it properly.

*When we wrote the assignments in China, the resources we used were mainly websites. And the references were just the direct links of these websites. (Alan)*

*I had some very basic ideas about academic referencing when I was in China, because our Chinese tutors talked about it. However, I didn't fully understand exactly what it was. (Rachel)*

### 7.5.2.3 Independent learning skills

The data suggest that there didn't appear to be any preparations at the institutional level focusing on helping the participants to become independent learners. For instance, all three home institutions seemed to have followed the traditional Chinese style teaching and adopted teacher-centred teaching approaches. For the majority of modules, it appeared that there were rarely any interactions in the classroom between the tutor and students. The participants remarked that they weren't provided with the opportunity, or encouraged to think and reflect on the knowledge they had learnt, or to develop problem-solving skills.

*Most tutors just read the textbooks in front and they hardly asked any questions. I was feeling bored sitting in the classroom. (Jane)*

*Our tutors often covered a large amount of content in one session. They didn't care whether we understood. In their opinion, once the teaching was done, we should have understood the knowledge automatically. (Michelle)*

Additionally, the data suggest that written exams were a key assessment method used in all three home institutions. Learning and teaching therefore emphasized mainly following tutors' instructions and getting through the exams successfully. When it was getting close to the exam period, the main purpose of classroom teaching became to feed the students with the exam answers directly. In this context, most participants recalled that they could pass the exams almost effortlessly, hence they felt that there was little need for them to attend classes or conduct the learning activities themselves.

*The exam driven education we had in China didn't help us cultivate any independent thinking skills and abilities.....in our HND studies, our tutors shared the exam answers with us in advance. All we needed to do in the exams was to fill in the blanks with these answers. (Lisa)*

*We were given a lot of revision questions and answers, and we were told that the actual exam questions were going to be picked from them. The questions were fairly simple. One could do very well if he or she was able to memorize all the answers beforehand. (Alex)*

## 7.6 Social preparations

### 7.6.1 At the personal level

#### 7.6.1.1 The Knowledge and understanding of the host culture

The data suggest that the participants can be categorized into three groups based on their knowledge and understanding of the host culture. The details are listed in the table below:

<b>Group 1</b>	<b>No preparations</b>	Alan, Daniel, Michelle, Rachel
<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Mis-preparations</b>	Alex, Harry, Jane, Sophie
<b>Group 3</b>	<b>Some preparations</b>	Amanda, David, Laura, Lisa

Table 7.2 The knowledge and understanding of the participants about the host culture

The participants in the first group didn't appear to have made any preparations in this aspect. Rachel and Michelle indicated that they *"thought about it beforehand"*, and *"knew that there would be cultural differences"*. However, it just didn't occur to them that they needed to make any preparations. As Michelle commented, *"I don't have any explanations [why I made no preparations in this area], I simply didn't consider this question at the time"*.

The participants in the second group seemed to have developed some incorrect assumptions and/or unrealistic perceptions about British people and/or British culture. For example, Sophie believed that Britain wasn't a very safe place to live,

and was feeling too scared to go out in the evening since she arrived in the UK. It was partially because Sophie believed that “*guns aren’t prohibited abroad*”. She said, “*I sometimes watch the news at home, and get the impression that western countries aren’t so strict with their gun control. In fact, [I think] globally China is the only country with the strictest law in this area*”.

Sophie was also convinced that “*there are a lot of drunk people [on the street]*”. She said that she was warned by a tutor in her home institution, who had studied in Britain previously, that “*in normal circumstances, most British people are OK. But many turn into hooligans once they get drunk, especially when they are watching football. [For example] they often fight with each other on the street*”.

For the rest of the participants in group two, their views and opinions about British life and living style, as well as the UK institution, seemed to have developed through watching western TV programmes.

*This city is similar to what I had imagined. I like watching Downton Abbey. Apart from those big cities such as London, I assumed that most UK cities should be beautiful, charming and historic, just like this one. (Jane)*

*I watched Downton Abbey and Oliver Twist in China, and imagined the life in Britain should be very similar to the one shown in these films and dramas. In other words, the buildings and the deco style should be very country style, and life should be very relaxing. (Harry)*

*I imagined the University should be very big. It should have a very large and ancient University gate, just like those shown on TV. However, our university gate doesn’t look like anything I had in mind. (Alex)*

Alfano and Robinson (2017) argue that people are more or less likely to believe what they saw or heard via the information they received through gossip, TV and similar communication media. This view seems to be supported by the evidence shown above. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that TV dramas and programs don’t normally represent reality, and instead, they give either idealistic or incorrect views of real life (Fiorelli, 2016). It is suggested that gossip isn’t formally authorized, since the speaker who distributes them often can’t provide clear and convincing proof, and may be even lying (Alfano & Robinson, 2017). As a result,

the information the participants in the second group gained through these resources may in fact mis-prepare them.

Before coming to Britain, the participants in the third group reported that they had a short living abroad experience. They stayed either in the UK or Australia for at least one month. Through this experience, these participants said they had some direct contacts with the local people, culture and custom, and indicated clearly that this experience was beneficial in helping them settle in quicker in Britain.

*My aunt lives in Sydney suburbs, and it feels very similar to this city. For example, supermarkets all shut at 5pm, and not many people are around on the street after 4, or 5 pm. Because I experienced it already, I'm more used to the situation, and am not feeling so surprised like others. (David)*

*Because I came to this university to study language before, I know the campus, the city and the surrounding environment very well. Everything feels so familiar when I come back this time. (Amanda)*

*Because of the experience I had in Australia, I actually like Britain much better. I stayed with my aunt in Melbourne at the time. It was a very quiet city, and I could hardly see any people on the street. But this UK city feels much better, and I can actually see many more people on the street. (Laura)*

### 7.6.1.2 Attitude and the preparations for social interactions

Based on their attitude and the actual preparations in relation to making local friends, the participants can again be divided into three groups. The details are as follows:

	<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Actual preparations</b>	<b>The participants</b>
<b>Group 1</b>	Go with the flow	No preparations	Alex, David, Daniel, Harry, Jane, Michelle, Laura
<b>Group 2</b>	A lack of interest	No preparations	Lisa, Rachel
<b>Group 3</b>	More enthusiastic	Some preparations	Alan, Amanda, Sophie

Table 7.3 the attitude and the preparations of the participants for social interactions



The participants in the first group didn't appear to give much thought to the social interactions with the host nationals beforehand, and didn't seem to have made any preparations in this aspect. They said that they mainly had a "go with the flow" attitude, that is, they didn't reject the idea, and however, making friends with the home students didn't appear to be one of the priorities on their list.

*I'm not against the idea of making British friends, but won't go out of my way to do it. I will have normal communications with them if I am put into the same group to do work with them together. (Daniel)*

*I have a feeling that I will never become very close friends with them. If the opportunity presents itself, I will try to get to know them and become normal friends. (Michelle)*

*To be honest, because I haven't yet had any contacts with non-Chinese students, I don't really know how long it will take [to make local friends] and how to be friends with them. (Harry)*

Both participants in the second group however indicated clearly that they weren't keen at all to have any social interactions with British students, hence, made no preparations in advance. For Rachel, it was mainly because of her personal feelings about non-Asian foreigners. Lisa' attitude however appeared to be affected mainly by her language abilities.

*I really don't know why, but I don't like non-Asian foreigners. It feels very strange and awkward when I am surrounded by them. I travelled to Hong Kong before and saw a lot of non-Asian foreigners. I was actually feeling very scared. (Rachel)*

*I can understand them, but it is feeling rather inconvenient to communicate with British people. I prefer to be friends with other Chinese students, because we have no communication barriers between each other. (Lisa)*

In comparison, the participants in the third group were more enthusiastic to have British friends. Amanda stayed with a host family for several months previously while she studied a language course in this UK institution. The direct contact and the experience she had in communicating with the local people socially seemed to have really boosted her confidence.

*I like the local people in this city. They are all nice and friendly. I lived with a local family for several months. They were very good to me, and looked after me well.*  
(Amanda)

For Sophie, making local friends was a good way to improve her language skills.

*I really want to improve my language skills. [My goal] is to be able to speak English like a native. [For this reason], I would like to make a lot of local friends.*  
(Sophie)

In order to make new British friends, the participants in group three appeared to have made some plans and preparations. For example, Alan intended to use presents as a way to break the ice.

*I brought many small Chinese crafts so that I can give them out as presents when I am making new friends [with the home students].* (Alan)

After he arrived in Britain, Alan said that he happened to share accommodation with a non-Asian student, who was a postgraduate student and was studying in the same academic school as Alan. At the time, Alan recalled that:

*Once I saw him in the kitchen and had a chat with him. I gave him one of the small Chinese crafts I brought with me. He really appreciated it and became very friendly to me. In return, he gave me a book [as present].*

Unfortunately, Alan reported that he was unable to keep the communication going, because of his weak language abilities: *“the guy was talking too fast. It sounded as if he was speaking in some kind of dialect. I couldn’t really understand him”*.

Soon after they arrived in Britain, Sophie mentioned that she made an effort and took the first step in making friends with the host nationals. For example, she said that *“I just joined a local film meetup group, and will meet up with the members once per month”*. Sophie said that she was hoping *“to have more communications with the locals this way”*. Additionally, she commented that she was looking forward to meeting the existing students in September.

## 7.6.2 At the institutional level

The participants reported that the actual preparations at the institutional level were offered mainly via a set of talks that were delivered by the Chinese agents of this UK institution in China. The talks covered some aspects such as student accommodation, the admissions and the flight journey, including what to pack, and the University airport collection service. However, the information and support provided seemed to be limited and incomplete, which the participants didn't feel as helpful as it should be.

*The agents passed on our application forms to the Institution, and the offers back to us. But we were left alone to deal with the visa application process, the agents didn't offer any help at all. We weren't provided with any other information, hence had no idea about what we needed to do after we arrive in Britain. We found out about everything only after our arrival. (Alex)*

One of the main problematic areas that the participants mentioned was their student accommodation. They reported that the agents directed them to the University accommodation website, but offered no additional explanation. The majority of participants commented that they found it very difficult to choose the most appropriate accommodation when they had to rely mainly on the website images.

*I couldn't really figure out what the living environment and the rooms were like when I was in China. I booked a studio at the time, but the reality was quite different from what I had imagined. [For example], the room was much smaller, the structure was different, and it was quite far from the campus. (David)*

*I chose mine randomly. I didn't quite understand the images on the website, and didn't know which one was which. (Alex)*

*There were many different types of accommodation, such as Flat or ensuite, but I didn't understand exactly what they were. (Harry)*

Another problematic area seemed to be relating to opening a bank account in Britain, due to the language barriers of the participants, and the differences in procedures between China and the UK.

*We were told that we needed to open bank accounts in Britain, but most of us had various issues in this aspect. For example, we didn't know how to get bank cards, also how to change the pin number, because things are very different in China. (David)*

*The staff in the Bank are talking too fast, I don't understand what they are talking about. ....The University didn't really help us apart from providing a letter. We were told to sort it out ourselves.....I was trying to make an appointment online with a bank, but my request was turned down several times.....I have no idea why. (Alan)*

Only a handful of participants appeared to have had a better experience than others, because of the additional help offered by their friends.

*I had a friend who came to this University earlier than me. I am on the 5-week course, but she is on the 8-week course. My friend explained to me about how to get a bank account, and how to request a bank statement. (Jane)*

*My friend took me to the bank and helped me get a bankcard. (Rachel)*

Apart from the information mentioned above, this UK institution appeared to have made little effort to help and support the participants get to know and make new local friends before and upon their arrival. For instance, when they arrived on campus to study the pre-sessional language programme, it was the summer holiday. The participants reported that they didn't have any chance to meet the home students. Additionally, apart from Rachel, the rest of the participants said that they were put in classes with only Chinese students.

*I don't think the pre-sessional course is going to help me improve my language skills much, as my classmates are all Chinese. (Amanda).*

*I heard that there were some Japanese and Thailand students coming to study the 5-week pre-sessional course, but my classmates are all Chinese students. (Alex)*

## 7.7 Summary

This chapter described the moving in findings of this research. Even though the focus was on the perceptions of the participants at the moving in stage, this chapter firstly described the initial transition experiences of the participants and

outlined the problems and difficulties they experienced at this stage, because the related findings would help the reader better understand the perceptions of the participants at the moving in stage.

The data suggest that the transitions of most participants followed the U curve model as they experienced the honeymoon stage, soon after they arrived in Britain. These students said that they were full of enthusiasm and couldn't wait to start their new life in Britain. At this initial transition stage, the participants didn't appear to be fully aware of the challenges and difficulties they were about to encounter in their top-up programme, since they weren't prepared adequately in the academic and social aspects at both the personal and institutional levels before departure. They didn't appear to have developed any effective coping strategies in mind either.

At the moving in stage, the academic and social development of the participants was focused on the pre-departure preparations at the personal and institutional levels. It appeared that the participants didn't make sufficient preparations at the personal level, and the home and the UK institution didn't seem to have provided adequate training and support to the participants either. For example, the participants appeared to have hardly paid attention to improve their practical skills in using the language. In addition, the participants reported that the language teaching in their home institution was largely teacher-centred and exam driven, and they said that they weren't provided with a proper authentic English environment either.

In relation to their academic preparation, the participants reported that both their home institution and the UK institution provided limited and sometimes incorrect information to them in the areas such as the British higher education system, their top-up programmes and the Chinese students' graduate rate in the UK institution. In addition, the participants felt that both institutions didn't provide sufficient training to help them develop the essential skills they needed to study in the UK, such as academic writing and independent learning.

As with their academic preparation, socially almost all participants didn't appear to have possessed sufficient knowledge about British culture. It seemed that both institutions didn't provide much information in this area to these students, but on the other hand, the participants didn't appear to have searched for the information themselves either. In addition, most participants reported that they didn't mind the idea of making new local friends, which however wasn't their top priority for this study abroad year.

The next chapter will present the moving through findings, which suggest that academically the participants seemed to start taking individual actions towards their academic development, though socially they appeared to have never really climbed out of the under-preparedness, and stuck rigidly to the level of interaction they had initially when they first arrived in Britain.

# Chapter Eight: The participants' perceptions of their academic and social development at the moving through stage

## 8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the personal experiences of the participants at the moving in stage, in particular, their pre-departure academic and social preparations at the personal and institutional levels. The findings raise questions that suggest this group of Chinese top-up students weren't prepared adequately at both levels before departure.

This is the second findings chapter and focuses on the personal experiences of the participants at the moving through stage. As with the previous chapter, all quotations in this chapter are taken from the portraits of the participants. It consists of six sections. As with the previous chapter, before analysing the language development, academic and social development of the participants in detail (sections three to six), this chapter firstly offers an overview of the areas such as the transition experiences of the participants at the moving through stage, the difficulties and challenges the participants experienced during their first semester, and their perceptions, since the findings in these three areas would help the reader better understand the personal experiences of the participants when they were half way through their one-year top-up programme.

## 8.2 An overview of the transition experiences of the participants

At the moving through stage, the participants were at the first semester of their top-up programme. It started at the end of September 2015 and finished in January 2016. The transition experiences of the majority of participants (10 out of

12) appeared to have followed the U curve model, as they progressed to the crisis stage between the mid to the end of their first semester. At the time, it seemed that some participants were feeling depressed and overtired; some were feeling disappointed and unmotivated; some were feeling homesick and others were feeling a combination of them.

*My crisis period started in October. This is because on the one hand, I gradually became familiar with the environment and began to know many things. And suddenly I felt that I wasn't feeling as excited as I was when I first arrived in Britain. On the other hand, I started missing home, since I had been in the UK for several months. At the time, I think I was quite emotional. (David)*

*During the assignment writing season (November to mid December), I was feeling very tired, and stressed, and my mood was quite low. At the time, there was so much to write, and I hardly had any writing experiences. I felt that I couldn't cope with it anymore and really wanted to go home. (Jane).*

The key reasons that triggered the movement of the participants from the honeymoon to the crisis stage seem to be academic pressure and challenges, cultural and language barriers. Because they felt that they hadn't yet developed the fundamental academic writing and independent learning skills, and also were unfamiliar with the UK education system, the participants by and large were getting overwhelmed by their academic coursework (see section 8.3, and 8.6 for further details). In addition, the cultural differences and language barriers started to have more impact on their daily life after the initial excitement started to disappear. This subsequently affected their mood and their perceptions about this study abroad journey. For instance, as mentioned below (section 8.4), most participants reported that they began to feel living in the UK wasn't as exciting and interesting as they had perceived initially, and they were unable to adjust and settle into the new social community.

As with the moving in stage, the transition experiences of two participants at the moving through stage were once again different from the rest of the participants. Since Daniel's experience will be described in detail in chapter nine, this section focuses only on Rachel's experience, which seemed to have only followed the U curve model partially. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Rachel said that she



experienced the crisis stage instead of the honeymoon stage when she first arrived in Britain.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the first semester, Rachel seemed to have managed to move forward onto the recovery stage during the first semester, as she said that *“I am feeling much better now, and certainly not as lonely as I was”*. Her progression was mainly due to the coping strategies she adopted, after she was getting to know the environment and surroundings. For instance, Rachel reported that she spent more time socializing with her Chinese friends, and also managed to share her accommodation with a close friend of hers.

*Many of my old classmates in my home institution also came to study top-up programmes in this university, we are now hanging out a lot together, just as the way we did in China.*

*I also managed to share a studio accommodation with a good friend of mine at the start of the top-up programme. It was really helpful. I don't have to live on my own anymore.*

### 8.3 The problems, challenges, and coping strategies

At the moving in stage, the participants had only just arrived in the UK. At the time, their top-up programme hadn't yet started, and the existing students were away on their summer break. At the moving through stage, the participants gained some experiences of the top-up programme, and started having a proper contact with other non-Chinese, including the home students. Consequently, the participants felt that they were thrown in at the deep end. The academic and social environment was completely new to them, and they had little clue about the situation they were in. This is mainly because before they arrived in Britain, the participants weren't given enough information and weren't supported to develop the knowledge and skills required to adjust and settle in this new UK institution. As a consequence, the participants began to encounter many study and social problems and challenges in their first semester.

### 8.3.1 Academic aspect

In the UK institution, most of the participants said they were struggling to adjust to the new education system. In addition to the fact that the participants reported that they received insufficient training at the institutional level prior to and after their arrival in the UK, this was because the participants were expected to take more control of their learning activities inside and outside the classroom. However, before coming to Britain, the participants seemed to be only familiar with teacher-centred teaching approaches, which, as they described, didn't encourage them to learn independently.

*I am so used to being spoon-fed. But suddenly the British way of teaching gives me so much freedom, which I don't really know how to handle. I think I might study better if tutors were taking more control and forcing me to study. (Alan)*

*We are given too much freedom and autonomy, which I don't really like. We are left to make decisions for many things and do whatever we like. It actually feels like nobody really cares about and looks after us. (Michelle)*

In addition, half of the participants reported that they didn't have any academic writing experiences before coming to Britain, and although the other half did, it appeared that there were many differences between their home institution and the UK institution in the areas such as tutor expectations, academic referencing, and the level of support provided.

*I know how to get the structure and format right, but I often don't know what content to put in [for each assignment]....Tutors' expectations and requirements are different for different modules. In my opinion, the biggest challenge [in assignment writing] is to understand what the individual tutor wants in one's assignment. (Alex)*

*I read the assignment brief, but I didn't really understand it. I don't know exactly what our tutor asks us to write....I now know tutors here in Britain pay more attention to references. But I don't know how many to use, and where to use them in my writing. (Michelle)*

### 8.3.2 Social aspect

Social communication and social interaction, for the vast majority of participants, appeared to be another challenging area to tackle, as they were having trouble developing new friendships with students of other nationalities. The data indicate that the participants felt that they didn't really know what to do and how to do to break the ice since they believed that there were fewer opportunities for them to do so.

The problems and challenges that had emerged from the data seemed to support what has been identified in current literature (see chapter three for details). It is however worth pointing out that even though most new year one undergraduate students, including the home and international students, also feel overwhelmed with university academic work and social commitments, they have a much longer time to settle in the new environment than the Chinese top-up students (a year vs. three years).

When they were facing the problems and challenges in the first semester, the participants appeared to have very different attitudes to their academic and social development, and consequently they adopted different coping strategies. Academically, some participants (2 out of 12) seemed to be more motivated and worked harder than others, some (4 out of 12) said that they understood that they needed to study harder but didn't devote as much as they planned to. And the rest (6 out of 12) appeared to be reluctant to study, and put minimum effort into it. Socially, it seemed that almost all participants adopted the same coping strategy, that is, they made very little effort to build new friendships with other non-Chinese students, and put themselves in an isolated situation.

## 8.4 An overview of the perceptions of the participants

After living and studying in this UK institution for several months, the perceptions of the participants changed in many aspects, compared to the moving in stage. For example, they reported that they became aware of the ineffectiveness of the

institutional level support before departure and after arrival, and believed that this was the main reason that they were unable to manage the difficulties and challenges they faced successfully at the moving through stage. The related details are offered in the section 8.6 and 8.7.

In addition, all participants commented they came to realise that studying in this UK institution was actually much harder and challenging than what they had anticipated, and also it was very hard to get a good grade, such as 60 for their assessment. Consequently almost all of them began to think that the academic goals and expectations they set for themselves at the beginning of this journey were too difficult and unrealistic to achieve.

*My views on studies are very different from before. I now have to study very hard. But I think it is worth it, because my hard work is rewarded with good results. (Laura)*

*In terms of the grades, it isn't as easy as I thought it to be. One can only get good marks if he is devoted to study. (Alan)*

*I planned to gain a 2.1 degree at the beginning [before the start of my top-up programme]. I still want to, but I am not so sure about it anymore. It seems to be very hard to get a 2.1[in this Institution]. (Daniel)*

In addition, almost all participants reported that they gradually understood that the social adjustment wasn't as easy as what they had in mind, and it indeed needed more effort for them to develop social interpersonal relationships with the host country nationals. The related details are offered in section 8.7. Due to the differences in living and entertainment habits between Chinese and British, the participants by and large revealed that they started to feel that the British way of life wasn't as exciting and interesting as they had imagined, and they started missing the life they had at home.

*Life in Britain is very boring, because there is a lack of entertainment [in the evening]. There isn't much to do apart from going to the pub, getting takeaways or exercising in the gym. But there is so much more to do in China. (David)*

*I don't tend to go out, because there isn't much to do in the evening. Occasionally I go to karaoke in a Chinese restaurant with my friends. The facilities aren't good compared with China. But we don't have any other options because there is only*

*one Chinese Karaoke place in the city. (Sophie)*

## 8.5 The global factor - language skills

### 8.5.1 At the personal level

At the moving through stage, there didn't appear to be any significant improvement in their language skills compared with the time when they just arrived in Britain. For example, the majority of participants reported that they couldn't fully understand their tutors or classmates, either because of the common forms of British slang and idioms they used, or because of their speaking speed.

*In the first semester, one of my module tutors had a very strong accent. It was quite hard to understand him. I did record his lectures at the beginning, but have stopped doing it now. This is because I realised that I still couldn't understand him even when I listened to the audio several times. (Daniel).*

*One of the modules I had in the first semester was about workplace discrimination. The tutor played many videos in class. I couldn't understand most of the content, not only because people in the videos were all talking very fast, but also because there were many difficult subject-specific vocabularies. (Sophie).*

In addition, most participants indicated that they were still struggling with their academic writing. It seemed that there was a lack of understanding of the basic conventions in academic writing, such as using correct English grammar and punctuation, and also developing academic arguments, for instance, Davie commented that *"I often don't know how to write my assignments. I have my thoughts and ideas, but find it very difficult to express them in English. I can write simple sentences, but don't know how to show the deep understanding of the issues I am writing about"*.

Apart from the fact that there was a lack of adequate support at the institutional level (see section 8.6.2 for further details), the other main reason for the situation they were in is that the participants reported that they didn't make sufficient effort at the personal level either. They said that they intentionally spent most of their time with their Chinese friends, and had minimum contacts with non-Chinese

people, particularly home students and the local residents. The related detail is provided in section 8.7.1.

Meanwhile, the majority of participants appeared to be reluctant to read English textbooks and journal articles, when they were working on their academic assignments. In addition, many of them said that they tended to rely on using translation software tools to translate what they wanted to write from Chinese to English.

*When writing assignments, we simply use a translator to translate the resources found on line from English to Chinese. (Michelle)*

*I really worry about my reading skills. For me it is very tiring and difficult to read through the whole article. It obviously would be much easier to read if the article was written in Chinese, because I could glance through it quickly. (Jane)*

### 8.5.2. The institutional level support

In the first semester, the students seemed to feel that the UK institution didn't provide the type of training and support the participants truly needed to develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills effectively. Because the language support was provided alongside the academic support via a module called Academic English, the related detail in relation to the institutional level support is provided in section 8.6.2.

## 8.6 Academic development

It appears that at the moving through stage, the participants felt that they didn't perform well academically and didn't achieve the academic results (average module mark of at least 60%) they aimed for initially. As with the development of their language skills, the participants believed that the main reason was that their home institution and the UK institution didn't help them develop the skills needed to study effectively in this new and strange academic environment. In addition, it appeared that most participants didn't work as hard as they should at the personal level.

## 8.6.1 At the personal level

### 8.6.1.1 Taking a better action

In the first semester, two participants - Laura and Lisa, seemed to be motivated by a strong personal drive and personal interest to make more effort towards their studies, as a result, it appeared that they adjusted to the new academic environment better than others, and achieved better academic results.

*I didn't reach 2.1 in first semester. However, apart from one module, I think the rest of the results were reasonably good. (Laura)*

*I haven't yet received all my results. However, among those that I have received, only the result of one module didn't reach 60, the rest of them did. (Lisa)*

Lisa was determined to gain a 2.1 degree, because she said that she was really keen to study a master's degree in another more prestigious UK institution with one of her best friends together.

*I made an agreement with my friend - we both would study in University X later together..... My friend is a year younger than me and currently is studying an HND programme in the same home institution in China (CU2). I won't really want to consider any other UK universities because we both like the host city S.....In order to get in University X, I need to either achieve a 2.1 degree or an IELTS score of 6.5. I don't think my English is good enough, so my only hope is to get the degree results required.*

Laura was also highly motivated to gain a 2.1 degree, this was in part because she revealed that she developed a personal interest in the top-up programme subject she was studying in this UK institution.

*I studied Hotel Management in China, but had to switch to Tourism, since the former wasn't available in this UK institution. Initially I wasn't sure whether I made the right decision. But now I realise I actually really like Tourism, and enjoy the learning. I feel that I have learnt some very interesting knowledge and information in this area.*

In addition, Laura reported that she developed some writing strategies and techniques, which seemed to have helped her achieve unexpectedly good results, and consequently boosted her self-confidence.

*I think my writing has improved significantly, because I have written so many [assignments]..... For me the key thing is that one has to do the thinking herself. She must figure out what she needs to write herself.*

And furthermore, Laura mentioned that she liked the British teaching style, in particular, she was interested in doing group discussions, which, as she believed, had the following advantages. Firstly, she said, *“this way time goes much quicker and I feel I engage better in class, because we are all involved in the discussions”*. Secondly, Laura commented, *“listening to others help me gain different opinions and broaden my mind”*. And finally, she believed group discussions *“provided me with more opportunities to speak English”, and hence “help improve my confidence”*.

#### 8.6.1.2 Taking some actions

In addition to Lisa and Laura, four participants seemed to have devoted more time and effort to their studies than when they were in their home institution in China. For instance, these participants reported that they developed a habit of preparing for class sessions beforehand. Jane said that this was the most effective way for her to *“learn better”* and *“keep myself focused in class”*. Alex supported her view and commented, *“I notice that I won’t be able to understand the lecture properly if I didn’t read ahead”*.

However, Sophie admitted that she didn’t work as hard as she should, since it appeared that she didn’t have the same level of personal drive or personal interest as Lisa and Laura.

*I don’t have particular expectations. It would be great if I can get a 2.1 degree. If not, I am not too worried. (Sophie).*

In addition, it might be because Sophie said that she changed her mind, and gave up the idea of getting a postgraduate qualification in Britain. She was more keen



to go back to China and look for a job, and hence became less concerned with her academic results. She said, “*I don’t think I need to worry too much about my results, because I won’t apply for a master’s degree*”. Consequently, Sophie didn’t appear to be as fully committed to her studies in the first semester as she planned to initially.

*I normally stay up for a few nights in a row to complete an assignment. I don’t tend to leave my course work to the last minute. Sometimes I start writing even two weeks in advance. However I notice I only become motivated to write and more productive towards the deadline, (Sophie)*

Alex and Jane seemed to be more concerned than others in preparing and revising for essay style exams, even though many participants said they were experiencing the same issue.

*I worry about my exams very much..... I am feeling very puzzled, and don’t really know what I should do [to revise effectively].(Jane)*

*For me, preparing for exams is high very challenging. I think I have tried my best and wrote anything I could remember. But I have no idea if I did OK or not. (Alex)*

This is because both participants mentioned that they gained good results in their exams regularly when they were studying in their home institution, and were feeling much more comfortable with Chinese style exam revision. However in the UK institution, they reported that they were feeling out of control in this area. As they explained, this is due to the fact that students were expected to make an effective revision plan and actually revisit the content and knowledge taught, and either the exam questions or answers were provided beforehand.

*While I was in China, I got 98 for one exam, because all exam answers were provided to us in advance, and I memorized them all correctly. Even though British tutors also provided us with some questions to prepare in advance, the actual exam questions aren’t the same. (Alex)*

### 8.6.1.3 Taking little action

In contrast, the rest of the participants (6 out of 12) seemed to choose to put minimum effort into their studies, even though they said they understood that they

needed to work much harder in the UK. Subsequently, their academic results of the first semester were poor, and some of them failed a number of modules. As these participants explained, their action was affected by their personal characteristics and/or the surrounding contexts at the time. For instance, as mentioned already (section 8.3), both Alan and Michelle reported that they didn't like the new learning and teaching approach. Alan admitted that he was demotivated, and constantly left his coursework to the last minute, which resulted in a rush job.

*In general, I don't work on my assignments until the last minute. ...it takes me a day to complete one..... when the deadline is approaching, I just have to do it, otherwise I am unable to submit it on time. (Alan)*

Michelle said that she had no interest in the subject she was studying in this UK institution, hence was having real difficulty engaging with the subject knowledge.

*I don't think Accounting is the right subject for me....I am hesitant to study the same subject again for my Master's degree.....I am not good at dealing with numbers, and don't really get what we are taught in class....My dad wanted me to study Accounting because he felt that it would be easier for me to find a job in the future.*

Amanda however felt that she was distracted mainly by her boyfriend, who completed his top-up degree in the same UK institution a year ago, but came back to visit Amanda. While he was in the UK, he demanded her company and attention all the time.

*Having a relationship like mine truly affected my studies. My boyfriend was only here to hinder and stop me to study properly. Because of him, I missed many classes and didn't have time to write my assignments.*

## 8.6.2 The institutional level support

The institutional level support offered to the Chinese top-up students seemed to be mainly via a module named Academic English, which was developed to provide them with continuous language and academic support in the Business School. The participants said that they were required to attend this one-hour

timetabled session on a weekly basis, and a module tutor was at present in each session to answer student questions. Most participants expressed their dissatisfaction towards this module, and believed that it didn't fulfil its purpose properly in the first semester.

*This Academic English module was pretty boring, and I didn't feel it was useful at all.....there was no teaching involved, and I didn't really have much to do in these classes. [In my opinion], it might only become helpful if one was able to show the complete draft [of an assignment] to the tutor. (Laura)*

*Most of the time this module was useless, in particular when one had no assignments to complete. We were asked to do homework instead if we had no questions to ask. However, I didn't have many tasks to work on, especially at the beginning of the semester.....I did use the time to pre-read the lecture handouts, but the preparation often took less than an hour. For the rest of the time, I just sat there doing nothing. (Jane)*

Their view appeared to be the result of the fact that these participants felt that this module didn't provide any active and structural teaching or training to help them develop their language and academic skills properly, or help them effectively cope with the problems and difficulties they faced.

Based on the academic challenges described above, and the support this UK institution offered to the Chinese top-up students, the participants felt that there was a gap between the type of support the UK institution thought the Chinese top-up students needed and the actual needs of these students. This might be because this UK institution was unaware of the actual problems and challenges that the Chinese top-up students were facing in the first semester, since there appeared to be a lack of communication between the UK institution and the home institution before the Chinese top-up students came to Britain (see chapter seven for further detail).

## 8.7 Social development

This section explores the development of the cross-cultural knowledge and skills of the participants, and also whether they settled into the local communities. The

data suggest that the participants didn't manage their social situation in the first semester very well. They didn't seem to have established social relationships with the home students, and didn't develop a better understanding of the host culture either.

### 8.7.1 At the personal level

Virtually all of the participants (10 out of 12) didn't appear to have socially interacted much or become friends with non-Chinese students in the first semester.

*I have no British friends in my social life. I hardly need to speak English. This is no good. (Jane)*

*I rarely have any social contacts with British, and have no British friends at all. (Rachel)*

The data suggest that the cultural differences and language barriers were part of the main obstacles. For instance, Alan said that he started a relationship with a Thai girl Anne in his first semester. Even so, he remarked that he didn't manage to make more Thai friends.

*For me, the main challenge is the cultural and language issues. I sometimes have a day out with my girlfriend and other Thai students. Once we travelled to Scotland together. There were 9 of us in total. 7 of them were Thai students. I brought a [Chinese] friend with me. The Thai students spoke to each other in their own language, but I don't understand Thai. Hence, I was feeling bored and left out. Most of the time I played on my phone or chatted to my friend.*

Lisa expressed a similar view. She said, *"I find it so much easier to talk to my Chinese friends. I don't really know how to carry on a conversation if I have to speak in English, it would make things much harder for me"*.

In addition, most participants believed that the UK institution didn't provide many opportunities to help them at least make a start on meeting new people on and off campus, further details are offered in the section below.

For those who had the opportunity to get to know others of different ethnic backgrounds, the development of new friendships seemed to be affected by a combination of factors, such as their personal introversion/extraversion, luck, opportunities presented and taken or not taken up. For example, Laura said she was put on a Tourism module, which only had two students: a British boy and herself. Due to her personal characteristics - *"I am too shy to talk to him"*, Laura reported that she had hardly any conversations with her British classmate throughout the whole semester.

David mentioned that he became acquainted with a British girl Jenny, who, as David described, *"is the only British I know of"*. Jenny was the girlfriend of one of David's friends, and was also studying in this UK institution. They sometimes went out together as a group. After they became more familiar with each other, David said that *"Jenny mentioned that she was happy to introduce her friends to me"*, but David commented that he was reluctant to take the opportunity as it appeared that he was afraid of trying something new:

*I hang out with them (his friend and Jenny) together sometimes, but I don't know Jenny that well...and don't have much personal contacts with her....I will see...maybe in future if there are opportunities.*

## 8.7.2 At the institutional level

As with their academic development, the students believed that the UK institution wasn't aware of the challenges and difficulties the participants faced in relation to their social development in the first semester, and therefore offered limited opportunities to help the Chinese top-up students get to know other students of different cultural backgrounds. For example, many participants mentioned that when they were having small group discussions in seminars, their module tutors made little effort to help break the barriers between the home students and Chinese students.

*I am always in a group with other Chinese students when having group discussions. Our module tutors don't seem to care who we are with in a group, or whether we speak to each other in Chinese or English. (Michelle)*

*We normally self select our group members. Tutors don't get involved. As long as we have a representative from each group to provide the answer at the end of the discussion. (Rachel)*

Additionally, some arrangements that were applied to the top-up programmes seemed to have made the establishment of new friendships even harder for the participants. For instance, it appeared that most Chinese top-up students were allocated in classes mainly with fellow Chinese students.

*Even though we are studying in a foreign country, we rarely have any contacts with local students. Among all my seminars, only one had a few home students. This is very different from what I had imagined. I thought at least three quarters of students in my class would be British. I never expected we would be separated almost completely from other students. (Daniel)*

*I thought [in my class] there would be many British students. However, the reality is that there are hardly any British students, my classmates are pretty much all Chinese. (Alex)*

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that what the participants said wasn't entirely accurate. As the researcher was working at this UK institution, she was aware that the Student Union in this UK institution did provide different types of social activities, and clubs to all students on campus and some of them aimed for international students specially. These activities might potentially help the Chinese top-up students get to know more non-Chinese students from other academic schools on campus. The related details are provided in chapter nine. Nevertheless, it appeared that none of the participants took part in these activities in the first semester, and they said it was because they weren't provided with sufficient details, and were left alone to explore and find the information themselves.

*I know nothing about these clubs and societies. I don't know where to find the information. None of my friends seems to have the information either. It maybe because they are designed mainly for Western, not Asian students. (David)*

*I haven't yet attended any societies. I got a list [of all clubs and societies], and wanted to learn to play tennis. But I didn't know where the club was located and who I should speak to in order to get the information I needed. (Alex)*

## 8.8 Summary

This chapter emphasized the moving through experiences of the participants, that is, their academic and social development when they were half way through this study abroad journey. Additionally, this chapter explored the level of support and the type of support this UK institution offered to the participants after they arrived in the UK.

The chapter began with investigating the transition experiences of the participants at the moving through stage, and the data suggest that the experiences of most participants followed the U curve model, as they reported that they moved out of the honeymoon stage and moved into the crisis stage in their first semester. The situation they were in was mainly because, as these students said, they weren't prepared adequately before they came to Britain. In addition, the participants felt that the level of support provided by the UK institution still didn't address their real needs after they arrived in the UK.

The perceptions of the participants at the moving through stage appeared to be different from the moving in stage. For instance, the participants commented that they became more realistic about the academic goals they set for themselves after they had a proper contact with the new academic environment and the new education system. In addition, they realised that they had to work much harder than when they were at their home institutions in China. Socially the participants felt that it was much harder than what they had imagined in terms of making new British friends. Meanwhile, the participants reported that they began to realise the problems regarding the institutional level support and its impact on their academic and social development.

The data indicate that the perceptions of the participants were impacted by the academic and social situation they were in, and also the difficulties and challenges the participants were experiencing in these two aspects. For example, after living and studying in the real language environment for several months, the language skills of the participants didn't seem to have shown any major

improvement compared with the moving in stage. Academically the participants reported that they were unable to manage their academic situation in the first semester and achieve the results they aimed for, and they believed that it was mainly because the UK institution didn't provide the type of support and training Chinese students truly needed to cope with the challenges and difficulties effectively.

Socially it appeared that almost all participants didn't manage to make British friends or have many social interactions with them in the first semester. The main reason, as the participants commented, was that the institution didn't offer appropriate opportunities to help them mix with other students. As a result, they said they were unable to integrate into the local society.

The next chapter is the final findings chapter, and will present the moving out findings. As we shall see, at the moving out stage, the perceptions of the participants, as well as their behaviours in relation to their academic development changed again. However, as with the moving through stage, their behaviours regarding their social development seemed to have remained the same.



# Chapter Nine: The participants' perceptions of their academic and social development at the moving out stage

## 9.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored the experiences of the participants at the moving through stage. Academically they reacted differently to their studies, but none of the participants seemed to be able to manage his/her academic situation well in the first semester. Socially almost all participants reported that they chose to socialize mainly with other Chinese top-up students, and didn't make any new British friends.

This chapter is the final findings chapter. It focuses on the experiences of the participants at the moving out stage, which seemed to be similar to the moving through, that is, the participants appeared to be not really capable of managing their academic and social development in the second semester. As with the previous chapter, all quotations in this chapter are taken from the portraits of the participants.

This chapter contains six sections. As with the previous two chapters, the first three sections explore the transition experiences of the participants at the moving out stage, the problems, challenges and the coping strategies of the participants, and their perceptions. The fourth, five and sixth sections focus on their language, academic and social development at the personal and institutional levels.

## 9.2 An overview of the transition experiences of the participants

The transition experiences of the majority of participants (11 out of 12) at the moving out stage appeared to have only partially followed the U curve model. The participants reported that they moved onto the recovery stage quickly at the beginning of the second semester, because they felt that they had gained some experiences in the first semester. However, none of them seemed to have experienced the readjustment stage in the second semester, the final transition stage proposed by the U curve.

*I am feeling better now. I have been through the assessments already, therefore I know what to expect next time. (Laura)*

*I was feeling really stressed in November last year, because we had so many assignments to complete, and I didn't know what to write. But now I am certainly feeling better now, as I know the situation I am in better than before. (Alex).*

This is mainly because the participants felt that there was continuously a lack of appropriate institutional level support in the second semester. Therefore, none of them seemed to have developed a full understanding of the UK higher education system, and also the ability and skills to truly integrate socially in the new social environment.

*Most of my friends feel our life in this year is pretty boring. None of us wants to stay in the U.K. anymore. I don't think I will miss living here. (Daniel)*

*To me every single day [living in Britain] is boring. I don't like the type of picnic in Britain, people are just sitting on the grass. Also when you go to a pub, the local people [I see] tend to stand there for the entire evening with only one glass of wine. It is so different from our habit, I don't like it at all. (Lisa)*

Missing the readjustment stage in their transition process appeared to have affected their personal development, since the participants were unable to fully take advantage of this study abroad opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills they planned to, and also the ability to live happily and comfortably in a

different culture. This potentially may have an impact on their future transition and development especially to those who were planning to study a postgraduate degree in Britain or in another western country such as Canada and Australia.

In contrast to the rest of the participants, Daniel's transition experience as mentioned in the previous chapters, didn't appear to have followed the U curve at all. Daniel felt that his transition experience could probably be represented "as a *straight line*", as there was hardly any ups and downs when he moved from the moving in to the moving out stage. For example, he remarked, "*when I first arrived, I didn't feel overly excited like my friends. Everything was feeling quite normal and natural... I didn't miss home, and wasn't feeling depressed when dealing with my assignments*".

The data suggest two reasons for his reaction. Firstly, it might be related to his personal characteristics. Daniel's portraits indicate that he was a calm person. He appeared to be relaxed and didn't tend to worry or feel annoyed about things. And secondly, it might be related to his previous experiences. Although he had never been abroad before, Daniel said that he started boarding since a young age, and was used to living independently and away from home.

*This is not the first time that I live away from home. My parents and myself are all used to it. Even when I was studying in my home institution in China, I only went home twice each year.*

### 9.3 The problems, challenges, and coping strategies

Academically most participants reported that they were still struggling with their academic writing (see section 9.6). Alongside their language barriers, the main difficulty appeared to be that these students were unclear about how they could produce a good quality assignment that would fully meet the assignment brief, and also their tutor's expectations, in particular, in relation to the level of criticality expected. Socially, as described in section 9.7, the vast majority of participants said that they didn't establish proper interpersonal social relationships with

members of the host country, and consequently failed to settle into the local communities.

As with the moving through stage, the participants had very different attitudes to their academic and social development, and adopted different coping strategies. Academically, the majority of them seemed to have paid more attention to their studies and really wanted to do well in the second semester. However, they didn't appear to think up any detailed and effective strategies, and some participants once again didn't appear to study as hard as they planned to. Socially all of them seemed to have given up making any effort to develop new friendships with home students, which they appeared to consider far less important than their academic performance.

## 9.4 An overview of the perceptions of the participants

The perceptions of the participants seemed to have changed again while they were progressing through their second semester. Most participants reported that they set a more realistic expectation for their degree results through the experience they had in the first semester, and also had a much clearer idea of the level of effort they should make to enhance their academic performance.

*I wanted to get a 2.1 degree, however, I think I probably will get a 2.2 because of the results I received so far....The reality is so different, and I had never imagined that it would be so difficult for me to even get a 2.2 degree. (Sophie)*

*At the beginning of the top-up programme, I did aim for a 2.1 degree. ....I lost my confidence after I failed a module in the previous semester....But now I think I would be over the moon if I could get a 2.2. (Amanda)*

As they remarked that they didn't gain the academic results they were aiming for in the first semester, the participants by and large said that they were eager to push themselves harder in the second semester.

*I am still aiming to get a 2.1 in the second semester. This is the biggest challenge for Me. (Sophie)*

*My semester one results were pretty awful. I think I really need to try harder and change the way I study, so that I can get better results in this semester. (Alex)*

Socially almost all participants seemed to have accepted the isolated social situation they were in, and became less interested in adapting to the new host culture, even though they appeared to become more familiar with the host city and the surroundings. In addition, many participants reported that they continued missing their life at home, and were convinced by their experience that living in Britain was very boring.

Apart from the fact that the participants believed that they weren't given the opportunities to get to know students from different cultures and work with them, many of them also felt that what they really needed was a Chinese, not a British social network, since they would go back to China after their studies. The related details are provided below in the section 9.7.

## 9.5 The global factor - language skills

It appeared that there were no major differences between the moving through and moving out stages regarding the development of the participants' speaking and listening skills. In fact, none of the participants seemed to have managed to reach speaking fluency in English during the year, the goal they set for themselves initially.

*I think my English is improved, but not strongly. To be honest, I think we would encounter fewer problems if we could speak English like a native. (Harry)*

*I think my English is getting better, but not improved significantly. Before coming to Britain, I didn't even have enough vocabulary to structure a sentence properly. I now definitely know more words and can have simple conversations. However, I am still unable to express myself and have proper conversations with ease. (David)*

In contrast, most participants believed that the constant and intensive assignment writing tasks had helped them develop their writing and reading skills, in spite of the fact that they found academic writing still very challenging.

*I think my reading and writing skills have improved a lot. [This is because] I have been writing a lot of assignments. (Amanda)*

*One of my main achievements in this year is the improvement of my writing skills. [I never wrote academic assignments in English before], and I think my writing skills are certainly better than when I first started. (Jane)*

Their lack of sufficient development in the English language seemed to be caused partially by the insufficient support offered by the UK institution (see section 9.6.2), and also by the fact that the participants, as they reported, chose to limit their social and academic contacts to largely other Chinese top-up students. Even though they were living in the UK, most participants felt that they often didn't speak English in their daily life (see section 9.7.1).

*Chinese is really the main language we are speaking [in Britain]. Even when we are travelling to other UK cities, we tend to go to Chinatown. (Alan)*

*My friends are all Chinese, I have hardly communicated with the locals [in this year]. (Lisa)*

## 9.6 Academic development

### 9.6.1 At the personal level

In the second semester, almost all participants reported that they were motivated to improve their academic performance and get better academic results. This is because they said they were going to study a master's degree immediately after they completed the top-up programme, and obtaining a good classification of degree, as described by the participants, was a key entry requirement of most prestigious UK institutions for international students.

*I would like to study a master's degree in a better ranked UK university... So far I have applied for four universities. Two required a 2.2 degree, and the other two required a 2.1 degree. (Daniel)*

*I don't mind studying [the top-up degree] in this University. But I will choose a better university to do my master's degree, because the ranking of this University*

*is quite low.... I don't want to take an IELTS exam again, so the universities I have applied for all required me to achieve a 2.1 degree. (Laura)*

However, none of the participants appeared to have achieved their goal in the second semester. In addition to their weak language skills, poor academic writing skills seemed to be the main obstacle faced by all participants.

*I still find it very hard to write assignments. In fact, it is one of the main challenges for me in the second semester. Sometimes I have no clue at all and don't know what to write. I often wished that somebody else could write my assignments for me. (David)*

*The main issues in relation to my academic writing are: firstly, I feel that I don't have enough time [to work on them], and secondly, I still don't have a clear idea about what exactly tutors want to see in my assignments. (Alex)*

In addition, the participants reported that there was still a lack of understanding of the British education system in some aspects among some of them, such as degree calculation, and assessment resit policies, even though they said that they were getting to know the academic environment better.

*I'm not exactly sure about the meaning of an honours degree in Britain....I failed a module even after taking the resit...I don't know if I am allowed to graduate..... (David)*

*I heard that we are required to achieve at least 100 credits, but I am unclear about how to calculate my degree classification. (Harry)*

*I don't think I can achieve a 60 in any of my exams. But many of my friends received this type of high mark in their resit exam, and they are very pleased. I would rather fail my exam and take the resit if I knew this was the case. (Lisa)*

Meanwhile, many participants commented that they were still reluctant to take ownership of their own learning process, and to manage their academic workload effectively.

*In the second semester, [I was having the same habit of] leaving my coursework to the last couple of days before the deadline. I tended to write through the night. [During these couple of days], I feel that I was unable to sleep anyway, because I had deadlines to meet. (Harry)*

*Sometimes I felt that I wasn't in the mood to attend my lecture, I then just skip it....I am struggling with some coursework, in particular, Accounting and Finance related....I rarely did any preparations beforehand, and didn't tend to go over the module content each week. I only did it when I started writing the assignment. (David)*

The location of the problem, based on what the participants said, seemed to lie on both sides - the institution and the participants. Most participants believed that they weren't provided with the support they really needed to develop their ability and skills effectively. At the personal level, it was because these participants didn't appear to be good at sticking to their plans, and didn't study as hard as they wished to, due to their individual circumstances. For example, Jane felt that she was losing personal interest and motivation in studies because of the persistent tiredness.

*I feel that I have never recovered completely from the tiredness of the previous semester, and can't maintain the same level of motivation anymore. For example, I normally got up to attend the morning lecture in my semester one. But in this semester I was too tired to get up on time. I then often skip the first class in the morning and attend the second one.*

David and Sophie appeared to have lost confidence in themselves, because of the experience they had in the first semester.

*I was feeling very confident in myself at the start of the top-up programme. I thought I could do well ...I am really disappointed at my semester one results. Now I am becoming more realistic about my own ability...I still want to get good results, but I don't think I have the ability to do so. (David)*

*I am still hoping to gain a 2.1, but I know this is going to be extremely hard for me..... I did a quick calculation, in order to get a 2.1, I needed to achieve at least one 70, and one 65 [in this semester] because there aren't many modules in the second semester. ....I think it is almost like a mission impossible for me. (Sophie)*

#### 9.6.1.1 Coping with the situation better than others

Even though all of them didn't appear to have managed their academic situation, two participants seemed to cope with it better than others. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Lisa and Laura said that they were motivated strongly by their personal drive and interest, and hence had studied better and settled in the new



academic environment better than others in the first semester. Based on this experience, both participants appeared to have boosted self-confidence and were getting better at taking control of their learning and academic workload.

*I realize that when living abroad, I have to become more independent and rely on myself to deal with things in relation to my studies and daily life, since the situation between the two countries is very different. While I was in China, I hardly needed to worry or do anything myself, because things were all done for you. (Lisa)*

*It is quite important to develop one's self-independence [when living and studying in Britain]. You need to have your own ideas about what you want to do and to achieve.... When the assessment season started, time became very tight.....It is very hard for me to remember all knowledge and information [covered in all classes on the day] at the same time. What I normally do is that I write them down in a Word document after each class, so that I won't forget them, and can also go through them next day. (Laura)*

Instead of focusing on this one-year programme only, Laura in addition seemed to have foresight for her future development. As she explained, gaining a good degree wasn't just for fulfilling the entry requirement of a master's degree, but more importantly, it would help her develop the knowledge and expertise that she might need for her future career.

*Some people may say that it isn't worth studying this one-year programme, because it is expensive. Instead, we should all look for a job and start earning money. However, through this study abroad journey, I gradually realize that it is crucial for one to gain a good degree. In order to be successful in future, one can only rely on oneself, but not anybody else. To me, a good degree is a good investment.*

Lisa explained that she was engaging herself in studies by developing a habit of not only setting personal goals and priorities, but also planning and managing activities to achieve them.

*I was feeling puzzled before and wasn't sure why I needed to study. When I was in my home institution in China, the environment we were in at the time meant that we didn't need to worry about anything apart from having fun and enjoying ourselves. As a result, I became very lazy. But now in Britain I realized that I could only rely on myself if I wanted to study well. I can't live and study the same way as before, and I must learn to plan and manage my own learning properly.*

She commented that she also learned to balance her studies and entertainment, which as she believed, could help her improve her studying productivity.

*I think it is important that one remains productive.....I don't study all the time. But when I am studying, I am giving it 100 percent. When I go out and have fun with my friends, I don't think about studies....Besides, I don't tend to follow rigid plans. I study more when I feel I am in the mood. Otherwise, I study less.*

Due to the strategies she adopted and the effort she made, Lisa remarked that she began to develop a personal interest in her studies, and felt that learning had become one of the most rewarding personal experiences she had in Britain.

*I have never studied as hard as I am now in my life. I feel that I really like and enjoy studies. It makes me feel happy when I learn new knowledge.*

## 9.6.2 The institutional level support

A lack of sufficient institutional level support was perceived by the participants as the main reason for their unsatisfactory academic development in their second semester. For instance, Harry remarked, *"in my opinion, there isn't enough support. I don't think the University cares about us - the Chinese top-up students"*.

This is largely because the participants felt that the existing support provided via the Academic English module didn't accommodate their needs or help them develop the skills required to manage the academic situation they were in, as Daniel commented that *"I haven't used this support much. I have tried my best to attend it [for the purpose of attendance], but quite often I don't have much to work on. It is felt boring and useless"*.

The Academic English module, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was essentially a series of independent learning sessions with the aid of a tutor. As the participants described, there was no formal teaching on either English language or academic writing skills. Students were mainly given autonomy to work on what they wished to during each session. They were expected to be proactive and initiate conversations with the tutor if they needed help and support.

However, based on my personal experience as a lecturer working in this UK institution, some of the perceptions mentioned above were true, but some weren't. For example, I am aware that in addition to the Academic English module, the Student Services provided group or one to one based training and support sessions on language and academic skills to all students on campus, including Chinese top-up students, and the related information was available on the University website. Nevertheless, the participants by and large didn't seem to be aware of the existence of this type of support.

Their lack of engagement and lack of awareness of the academic support, as data suggested seemed to be caused by a number of reasons. At the institutional level, it appeared that there was a lack of communication between the home institution of the participants and this UK institution prior to and after the participants arrived in Britain. As a consequence, this UK institution didn't appear to be fully aware of the learning needs of the Chinese top-up students and the academic difficulties they were experiencing through their top-up journey, and also didn't promote the services and support clearly and effectively among Chinese top-up students or assist them to study and function efficiently in this self organized learning environment. In this situation, the sustainability of this particular group of international students was affected significantly.

At the personal level, as mentioned above, the participants by and large said that they were still having difficulties adjusting to a more learner centred learning environment. Since they were more used to being fed with the information and following tutor's instructions, these students reported that they actually preferred their tutor to provide support, instead of to make the effort themselves.

Additionally, some participants commented that they were in favour of seeking the support of their subject module tutors directly, rather than the academic English module tutor, since they felt that their module tutors were able to provide more specific scaffolding support to their assignments.

*[My understanding is that] the academic English tutor only checks the structure and the framework of your assignment. In order to do so, one needs to provide a*

*complete draft. But I can't produce one until the late stage [in the semester]. But my module tutors can give me advice even though I show them only a very simple structure. (Laura)*

*I can email my module tutors regularly during the semester if I have any questions in relation to my assignments....I can show them the incomplete and complete drafts to them in seminar...I have also booked some one to one tutorials for this purpose. (Alex)*

Furthermore, it was also possible that some of the participants didn't pay attention when they were pointed to the resources or provided with additional explanation. For example, Alan said, *"my language tutor might or might not have told us [the information about degree classification]. But I can't really remember"*.

## 9.7 Social development

### 9.7.1 At the personal level

At the moving out stage, the data suggest that the social situation the participants were in remained the same as the moving through stage. They said they were continuously noticing the cultural differences between the two countries, but developed limited knowledge and understanding of the host country's culture.

*I feel I know nothing about the British culture and customs. To be honest, I don't plan to anyway because I only need to live here for a short period of time. (Michelle)*

*I think I know some basic differences between the two cultures, but I don't really know the British culture, because I have hardly had any contacts with the local people. But this doesn't bother me. To me, it is not a big deal whether I get to know the local culture. (Sophie)*

In addition, as mentioned below, it appeared that the more they lived in Britain, the more the participants felt that life in this country was really boring. Because they were missing the life in China so much, the participants by and large didn't seem to really enjoy living in Britain. Furthermore, because of the difficulties and challenges they experienced in this area in the previous semester, almost all

participants reported that they stopped making the effort. Instead, they decided to keep themselves to themselves, and socialize only with other Chinese top-up students.

*I'm not too fussed about making British friends at all. I occasionally talk to my flat mates, but that is all..... I think it will be quite uncomfortable to go out with non-Chinese students, and I may even feel embarrassed. My language isn't good, besides, that isn't much to talk about between us. (Sophie)*

*I am now surrounded mainly by Chinese. To be honest, I can no longer tell whether I am living in China or Britain. (Amanda)*

Their social development at the moving out stage, as the data indicate, appeared to be affected by a combination of factors. The first one was language barriers, and was related closely to the national context, namely, the English curriculum in China, which focuses heavily on “reading” and “writing” skills, and students have few opportunities to practice using the language in communication (Feng 2011; Li & Baldauf, 2011). For example, the participants said that when they were studying in their home institutions in China, they weren't provided with a true authentic language environment to practice their listening and speaking skills, instead, they were guided and expected to devote all their attention and effort to pass the institutional exams and their IELTS test. As a result, the participants didn't appear to have developed sufficient language skills to be able to communicate adequately in their daily life and meet the academic expectations of their top-up programme when they first arrived in Britain.

The second factor was cultural differences. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the different cultural backgrounds between both countries appeared to lead to different preferences in entertainment. After they had been living in the country for nearly a year, the participants commented that they were fully convinced that life in Britain was boring. In their opinion, there was so much to do in China in the evening, such as eating out, shopping and playing different types of indoor games. In contrast, the main and most popular entertainment in Britain seemed to be socializing and drinking in pubs. This wasn't of interest to the majority of Chinese students.

*There are hardly any entertainments in Britain. Most British like to have a picnic or play golf. But I don't like any of these....There are so many exciting things to do in China, day time and evening. For example, there are many live room escape games. In some games, one can pretend to be a detective to solve a crime. They are all very interesting. (Lisa)*

*British people must really like drinking. It seems that in the evening they all like to go to pubs to drink. Their nightlife is quite boring, because this is mainly what they do in the evening. (Sophie)*

The findings also showed that the different cultural and social norms between China and Britain seemed to really affect the ability of the participants to understand British humour. For example, many participants clearly said that even though they had no problem understanding the literal meaning of the words, they didn't find British jokes funny. For example, Amanda commented, "*British seem to laugh a lot when they have conversations. But I don't think what they say funny at all. Many times I have to force myself to laugh*".

And the final factor for the social maladjustment of the participants was the length of their study abroad journey. As mentioned already, the duration of a top-up programme and a master's degree in the UK was only one-year (see chapter three for further details). Most Chinese top-up students felt that it was unnecessary for them to make the effort to truly understand and integrate into the new culture, since they only needed to stay in the UK for a short period of time.

*I still prefer to know more Chinese instead of British students. Because I only stay in Britain for a very limited period of time and will go back home soon. (Lisa)*

*I have my own friends already. Besides, it isn't worth the effort since I only stay in this city for a year. (Daniel)*

However, research has shown that better social relationship normally means better academic development (Singh, 2012; Khan et al., 2015; Ahmadi, 2016), as it may provide a better opportunity for the Chinese top-up students to interact and learn from more experienced existing students on the programme. In addition, developing social interpersonal relationships with some home students may help

Chinese top-up students develop a more realistic expectation of the top-up programme and the environment, and also a sense of belonging (Keenan, 2014).

## 9.7.2 The institutional level support

As with the academic support, the participants believed that this UK institution didn't sufficiently help them settle in, or mix with British students in their daily life. This was in part because some participants felt that there weren't enough social activities and events dedicated to international, in particular Chinese students.

*I think the Student Union has overlooked the needs and expectations of international students. I have friends who are studying in other UK universities, and they have had many interesting activities, such as playing table tennis together, and students of different nationalities cooking together. Why don't we have activities like those ones? (Laura)*

In addition, some felt that the activities they were offered weren't so attractive to Chinese students.

*I never attended any activities organized by the Student Union. I can't even remember what they were...I just had a quick glance at the emails at the time. But I do remember that I wasn't interested in any... it isn't my type of entertainment. (Daniel)*

*The university has organized some activities, such as a trip away, and Christmas meal. But I don't have much interest or energy attending them, and tend to just ignore these emails....because we have so many assignments to do, many of us write through the night and don't get up till late. To be honest, our day often starts from 4pm in the afternoon. (Sophie)*

In the classroom, as with the previous semester, many participants believed that their module tutors made very little effort in class to assist Chinese top-up students to break down the communication barriers.

*There were too many Chinese top-up students in each class. I really wished the University took action and grouped Chinese and home students together when we were doing group presentations or discussions in class. This way at least there were a couple local students in each group. Currently we had to be in a group together with other Chinese students, there weren't really many options for us. (Harry)*

Nevertheless, based on my professional experience in this UK institution, some of the perceptions of the participants were true, but some weren't. For example, the classroom level support regarding international student integration is probably weak, as many academic tutors weren't necessarily aware of the difficulties and issues the Chinese top-up students were experiencing during their top-up programme, due to the fact that there was little communication between their home institution and this UK institution.

The Student Union however organised various activities and social events for students on campus. Some of them, such as the international board game, the great global tea party and a Hanukkah festival, were created specifically for international students. At the departmental level, students were also invited to join the Business society. It was run by students and provided additional events and activities for the Business School students. The related information was available on the University website, and was also sent to students by email.

The lower level participation of these students on the social activities and events could partially be the result of the cultural and language barriers. In addition, it might be because there was a lack of clear understanding of the difficulties and challenges the Chinese top-up students were experiencing, and consequently their true needs in relation to their social development at the departmental and institutional level. In this respect, perhaps the Student Union and societies need to think of better and more appropriate ways to promote the activities and events among the Chinese top-up students, or create some icebreaker events especially for this group of international students.

## 9.8 Summary

This is the final findings chapter, which explored the academic and social development of the participants at the moving out stage. The data reveal that because most participants appeared to be unable to manage their academic and social situation again in their second semester, the transition experiences of most



participants at the final transition stage only partially followed the U curve model, as they never progressed to the final re-adjustment stage.

During this period of time, the perceptions of the participants changed again. Academically most participants said that they set clearer and more realistic expectations for themselves, as they became more familiar with the academic system and the learning environment. They reported that they aimed to work even harder than the previous semester and attempted to gain a better result in the second semester, as the majority of them decided to study a graduate degree after completing their top-up programme, and getting a good undergraduate degree was essential for applying to a prestigious UK university. Socially the participants seemed to decide to give up trying to integrate into the local societies, due to a lack of proper support and the difficulties they experienced in the first semester. In addition, the participants reported that they realised that it wasn't as simple as they had imagined in terms of making new British friends.

In spite of their goals, most of the participants admitted that they were unable to manage their academic and social situation in the second semester either, and also experienced similar academic and social difficulties as with their first semester. For example, they said that they were struggling with writing their academic work, and failed to produce high quality coursework that met their tutors' expectations. In addition, they reported that they didn't achieve the results they aimed for either. Socially the participants mentioned that they didn't get to know the local culture very well, and were unable to settle in properly in the new social environment.

Data suggest that an important reason for the situation the participants were in was that they believed that they weren't supported sufficiently at the institutional level. The existing support offered via the Academic English module didn't seem to help them develop the skills they were required to cope with the academic situation they were in. They also felt that the institution didn't support them well in terms of breaking the social barriers in and outside the classroom. In addition, the data indicate that many participants didn't seem to have made the level of effort

needed at the personal level either, even though they intended to study well. There appeared to be various personal reasons that prevented them from engaging in their learning activities, such as a lack of self-confidence and being overly tired.

It is however worth mentioning that some perceptions of the participants in relation to the institutional level support were incorrect. For example, the institution offered various forms of academic and social support at the school and institutional levels, although some might not have been designed specially for Chinese top-up students. In this context, the UK institution perhaps needs to consider providing a better way to promote these activities to the Chinese top-up students, and/or design some icebreaker activities to help these students to break down social barriers.

The next chapter is the discussions chapter, and answers the sub question: *what does the data collected suggest about the principal causes of problems and challenges Chinese top-up students face during their transition?*

# Chapter Ten: Discussion: what does the data collected suggest about the principal causes of problems and challenges Chinese top-up students face during their transition?

## 10.1 Introduction

The previous chapter was the last findings chapter, and was focused on the academic and social development of the participants at the moving out stage. It appeared that as with the moving through stage, almost all participants didn't successfully manage their academic and social situation in the second semester either.

The students' perceptions of their academic and social experiences during the periods of moving in, moving through and moving out (see chapter seven to nine for further details) seem to suggest that this one-year top-up programme was a challenging journey for this group of Chinese top-up students, as they reported that they experienced plentiful difficulties and problems academically and socially throughout their journey.

Also the comments of the participants seemed to suggest that there were mistakes on both sides - the participants and the UK institution, and these mistakes interacted with each other. For instance, the participants said that they didn't make the effort they needed to at the personal level, but they also felt that the institution didn't offer sufficient help and support to them either. A lack of appropriate and adequate institutional level support, as the participants described, appeared to have demotivated and caused the participants to lose interest and self-confidence. However, without the adequate personal level effort, the participants demonstrated that they were unable to develop the essential independent learning skills and become a true independent learner when they

were relying solely on the insufficient institutional level support.

If the perceptions of the participants were supported by other evidence, then there would seem to be a serious problem in relation to the institutional level support (home institution and the UK institution) before and after these Chinese top-up students arrive in Britain. Therefore, further research in understanding the personal experiences of Chinese, and potentially other international top-up students when they are transitioning through a UK institution seems very necessary. The related recommendations are provided in chapter twelve.

In addition, if the statements of the participants are true, there are additional questions and concerns emerging in relation to top-up degrees offered at this UK institution. For example, is this top-up degree fit for purpose? Is the UK institution asking too much of students who come from a very different social and academic culture and aren't very academically gifted to transform from novice to expert of British academic and social culture in just one-year? Also should British higher education institutions expect international students with such backgrounds to deal with and manage their academic and social situation in just one-year?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to gain an in depth understanding of the related contexts the participants were situated in. Therefore, this chapter is designed to explore the problems and issues the participants were experiencing from three different levels: micro (personal), meso (institutional), and macro (national). It is worth pointing out that even though the data collected (the comments of the participants) appears to mainly suggest micro level causes directly, it has inferred meso and macro level causes indirectly.

This chapter is divided into five sections. Before analysing the principal causes, it firstly summarizes the problems and challenges the participants reported they faced while they were studying a one-year top-up programme in the UK. The first section also contains some of the principal causes – which are dealt with in the next sections. The section two to four discuss the principal causes. It begins with “the big picture” - macro level, and then comes down to meso and micro levels. The final section explores the interrelationships between these three levels.

## 10.2 Problems and challenges Chinese top-up students face

The previous findings chapters (chapters seven to nine) discussed the problems and challenges the participants said they faced at each individual transition stage (moving in, moving through and moving out) in detail. It appeared that language barriers affected both academic and social development of these students. In addition, the participants reported that academically they experienced issues relating to academic culture, academic writing and independent learning skills, and socially they faced challenges in the areas such as social interactions, and cultural integration.

Some of these issues, such as language barriers, the differences in learning and teaching approaches, cultural differences, and interpersonal issues were also suggested by the data as key underlying factors to all other problems and challenges Chinese top-up students encountered in Britain. The related details are provided in the sections below.

### 10.2.1 Academic aspect

To meet the requirements and expectations of the final year, also the most advanced year in an undergraduate study in the UK, the participants felt that they were expected to make their adjustment and development process in a very short period of time. As a result, they reported that they encountered more severe academic difficulties and challenges than other international students who had a longer period of time to adjust. This consequently seemed to have had a major impact on their academic performance and achievements.

For example, soon after the start of their top-up programme, the participants said they realized the education systems between China and Britain, such as the teaching and learning approaches and assessment methods were very different, and they felt that it was highly challenging for them to master academic writing

skills, in particular in relation to academic referencing, understanding British tutors' expectations, and writing critically. Meanwhile, they reported that they struggled to cope with the intensity and quantity of their academic assignments. Many of the participants also found it uncomfortable to take responsibility to manage and control their own learning.

### 10.2.2. Social aspect

It has been well documented (see chapter three) that Chinese students find it difficult to form social relationships with non-Chinese when they study abroad, such as the members of the host country. This view is supported in this research. While they were studying in this UK institution, it appeared that very few of the participants managed to make British friends, even though some had said they were planning to do so when they first arrived in Britain.

In this situation, the participants seemed to retreat and went for an easier alternative option, that is, socializing mainly with fellow Chinese top-up students. Consequently, these students said that they were unable to integrate into the local community, and lost opportunities to learn the new local culture properly.

## 10.3 The principal causes of problems and challenges

This research set out to gain a good understanding of the personal experiences of a small group of Chinese top-up students when they studied a top-up programme in a UK institution. The data collected through semi-structured interviews, as described in chapter six, was the personal views and comments of the participants.

To fully understand the academic and social experiences of the participants, it is also very important to know the background and other surrounding contexts before and during their studies in this UK institution, such as their learning experiences in China, the learning and teaching approaches in the Chinese and British higher education, their language ability, and the features of top-up

programmes. In this situation, the data collected, when being analysed in contexts, provided a clear insight into the influences of the institutional and national factors on the personal experiences of this group of Chinese top-up students.

As a consequence, the causes of problems and challenges these students said they faced during their transition are explored and discussed in three levels: macro, meso and micro. Where there is a shared cause, it will be explained in detail in one level, but mentioned in the other two levels at the same time.

### 10.3.1 Macro level - the national level

All macro level, particularly the national level causes were inferred by the data and were comprised of the following: the special features of articulation agreements; cultural differences between China and Britain and English language education in China. This section focuses on the first two causes, as the final one is discussed in the section below (micro level).

#### 10.3.1.1 Articulation agreements

The top-up route the participants followed to study in the UK, as described in chapter three, was a type of articulation agreement between their home institution in China and this UK institution. Based on this particular agreement, these students were expected to complete a three-year HND or an equivalent level of programme in their home institution in China first, and then transferred to study continuously in this UK institution for another year to gain a British undergraduate degree.

Current literature and the findings of this research both suggest that the top-up route is very popular with Chinese students and their families, since it enables these students to spend less time and money to study abroad, but gain a valuable UK bachelor degree (HEFCE, 2014; HEFCE, 2015). In spite of its popularity, the participants, after completing their top-up programme, however suggested that

one-year didn't seem to be long enough for them to adjust and settle in the new learning and living environment properly.

*This one-year study abroad experience is good, but I have been feeling very tired. If I were to choose again, I think I would go abroad as soon as I finish my secondary school, because one-year isn't enough for me to catch up and improve my language and academic skills. (Jane)*

*Many of us are feeling the same: it is very difficult [in this one-year] to make a significant improvement, in particular in relation to the language skills. [There are benefits] as I get to see the outside world. However, I think one needs to stay here for at least three to four years if one wants to truly improve the language skills. (Laura)*

The findings suggest that a key reason for this view is that the participants felt that they weren't provided with appropriate and sufficient training and support at the institutional level before and after they arrived in Britain, in relation to their language skills, and academic and social development (see section 10.3.2.1 for further details), since there appeared to be a gap between what the home and UK institutions perceived to be the help these Chinese top-up students in need and what these students said they really needed in order to settle in and function in the new learning and teaching environment.

This gap might be the result of the way articulation agreements were operated. As mentioned in chapter three, the UK institution didn't seem to be required to contribute to the programme delivered in the Chinese institutions, especially in the areas such as curricula design, teaching, learning and related activities, even though the institutions in both countries were in a collaborative partnership. Therefore, it appeared that their home institution in China was unclear about the expectations of the top-up programmes, and the skills that these students needed to cope with the future academic and social challenges in the UK. For the same reason, the UK institution seemed to lack a clear understanding of the participants' learning experiences in China, and their learning ability and habits.

Additionally, many participants didn't appear to be motivated to study and work as hard as they should either. This may possibly be related to the quality of student



cohort, since an articulation agreement doesn't require approval by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China, so the entry requirements of the programmes delivered in the Chinese partner institutions are normally lower and less demanding than for a traditional Chinese undergraduate degree (see chapter three for further details).

This view was supported in this research, as most participants indicated that they chose to study abroad not only because they wanted to, but also because they didn't do well in the National College Entrance Examination in China (the gaokao), and hence were unable to study in a prestigious Chinese university.

*My gaokao results were pretty bad, and I couldn't get in a good university in China, therefore, I considered the study abroad option. (Daniel)*

*The reason that I chose to study an international programme was that I failed the gaokao, my exam results were really poor. So I had to study abroad. (David)*

Consequently, this group of Chinese top-up students appeared to be less academically gifted than the state planned students (those who are admitted to study in a Chinese institution via the National College Entrance Examination).

### 10.3.1.2 Cultural issues

It is well known and well documented that culture in the East and West is very different in many aspects such as food, living habits and dining etiquette (see chapter three for details). Research has shown that when they study abroad, Chinese international students often find it very challenging to adjust to the new cultural environment. A large proportion of them tend to experience culture shock after the initial interest and excitement are fading away. As a consequence, cultural barriers are commonly recognized as one of the main causes of Chinese students' adjustment problems (Wang & Hannes, 2014; Li & Zizzi, 2017).

The findings of this research echoed the published literature. Cultural and language differences appeared to be the key reasons that hindered the participants from making new British friends and engaging with the local

communities. As described in chapter eight and nine, the majority of participants indicated that they found it difficult to carry on conversations with British people, largely because of their different understandings of humour. For instance, they noticed that British people liked to tell jokes in their conversations, but they didn't find British jokes funny.

Furthermore, social entertainments between both countries are also very different. The participants by and large believed that there was a large variety of entertainment activities to choose from when they were in China, and shops stayed open late. In contrast, they felt that life in Britain was boring, as there wasn't much to do in the evening apart from going for drinks in the pub, and the shops were closed too early.

### 10.3.2 Meso level - the institutional level

Meso level, or the institutional level causes are: a lack of communication between their home and this UK institution; a lack of understanding of the previous learning experiences of Chinese top-up students (by the UK institution); a lack of sufficient and appropriate training and support to Chinese top-up students before departure and after arrival (by both institutions); and the different learning and teaching approaches between both institutions.

Of these, the first two causes were suggested directly by the data, but the latter two were suggested more indirectly by the data. This section is mainly centred around the latter two causes, as the first two are already described in the section 10.3.1.1.

#### 10.3.2.1 A lack of sufficient training and support at the institutional level

Before coming to Britain, it appeared that the participants were underprepared academically and socially at the personal and institutional levels (see chapter seven for further details). For example, they reported that both their home

institution and the UK institution didn't provide adequate information and support to enable them to get familiar with the pre-sessional and their top-up programme, or to develop skills required for their future studies in Britain, such as academic writing, and independent learning, in spite of the fact that this was supposed to be one of the main purposes of the HND and international programme they studied in their home institutions. Socially the participants considered that they had limited knowledge and understanding of British culture, and weren't fully prepared for making new British friends.

After they arrived in Britain, the participants felt that the type of support and the level of support they were offered by the UK institution didn't truly help them develop the skills needed to cope well with the academic and social challenges they were facing during the one-year study (see chapters eight and nine for further details). As a consequence, the participants appeared to have experienced a very difficult time in the UK institution: they reported that they were unable to fully adjust to the new academic environment and to achieve the academic results they were aiming for. In addition, it seemed that most of the participants were unable to socially integrate into a local community and enjoy living in Britain.

### 10.3.2.2 The learning and teaching approach adopted in their home institution

It is well known that Chinese schools adopt a teacher-centred approach. It has a very long history in China, and is linked closely to the exam driven, results focused nature of the education system (see chapter two for further details). For most of their life, Chinese children are taught to focus on preparing for the Chinese National College Entrance Examination (the gaokao) - the gateway to universities in China.

At the higher education level, the situation largely remains the same. Teaching in the vast majority of Chinese institutions continues to be tutor led, and is delivered mainly as formal lectures. Tutors appear to be more used to feeding knowledge

passively to students, and provide few opportunities for interactions among students, and between the tutor and students in classroom (Su, 2011; Yin & Wang, 2014).

The findings of this research supported the key features identified above in the literature. For instance, it seemed that the participants knew exactly how the Chinese system worked, what they needed to do as students, and how to get through exams successfully, as they had been studying in this teacher-centred environment since a very young age. Besides, even though the HND or international programme they studied in their home institution was supposed to prepare them for study abroad, the teaching, based on what they described, still followed the traditional Chinese way.

When commenting on their previous experiences in their home institution, most participants said that they didn't particularly like teacher-centred teaching approaches. On the one hand, they felt that their Chinese tutors paid very little attention to their learning effectiveness, and only focused on getting them through exams. On the other hand, the participants considered that most classes were boring, as many tutors didn't seem to know how to attract student attention and engage them in learning.

*Our tutors didn't really care whether we turned up in class or whether we listened. I sometimes fell asleep in class, but my tutor wasn't bothered, he was still carrying on teaching as normal. [I felt that] the majority of our tutors didn't pay attention to teaching at all... We were asked to purchase all textbooks, but I think the teaching only covered less than 10% [of the book content]. (Lisa)*

*Our tutors in China only read through the PowerPoint slides or the textbook in class. They hardly asked questions and didn't care whether the students were listening. (Jane)*

Based on their own experience in their home institution, all participants appeared to have developed the following perceptions about higher education level study. For example, they perceived that university was a much more relaxing environment compared with school. One could get through it easily and achieve good marks without working hard. If they failed a resit exam, they knew that they

didn't need to worry about it too much as somehow the University would let them pass the module.

*Most of our tutors weren't that strict and would let us pass if we had to resit. If some failed their resit, they were still given one more opportunity to resit, and get through eventually. But the resit fee for the second time was quite expensive. (Daniel)*

*Pretty much all students who took a resit exam were given a pass, unless they didn't turn up in the exam. If this happened, they would be given another chance in the final year. As far as I know nobody in my cohort failed [the programme]. (Jane)*

### 10.3.2.3 The learning and teaching approach adopted in this UK institution

During their time in this UK institution, the majority of participants said that the tutors they met at their top-up programme were more student oriented than those they had experienced in their home institution in China. As discussed in earlier chapters (chapters three and seven), a student-centred approach intends to cultivate students to become active and independent learners. It positions students, rather than the teacher at the centre of the learning and teaching process.

The data suggest that teaching in this UK institution was delivered in a variety of formats, such as lectures, seminars and workshops. Alongside tutor delivered teaching, collaborative learning activities such as group discussions seemed to be used regularly in class to encourage students to express and share their opinions.

*A lot of the seminars we had in the first semester were group discussions based. (Daniel)*

*We have had many group discussions [in both semesters]. Sometimes I am in a group with five others, but sometimes there are only two of us in a group. (Laura)*

Apart from textbooks, the participants reported that their tutors used case studies to help them understand how the knowledge could be applied in real life

situations. In addition, most participants felt that they were given plenty of freedom and autonomy to plan and take control of their own learning and assessment preparation.

*There are a lot of freedom, and one needs to make decisions for himself on whether and how he wants to study. One would suffer himself if he decides not to study. (Harry)*

*[while we are in Britain], we have to take responsibility for our own studies. For example, nobody is chasing us to attend classes. In this situation, I have skipped classes quite often....I am more used to be managed and controlled by our tutors in China. (Daniel)*

Nevertheless, the majority of participants indicated that they found the new system they were experiencing in this UK institution was very challenging, and also difficult to adjust, even though initially they thought it was better than the Chinese system (see sections 8.6 and 9.6 for further details). This is in part because, as mentioned already (chapters seven-nine), these students reported that they weren't fully prepared to deal with the new system before they came to Britain. It was also because the participants believed that the UK institution didn't give them enough time and adequate support to adjust to it properly after they arrived in Britain, as the data suggest that they were left alone too soon and too much to attend to the situation they were in themselves.

As shown above, there appeared to be some major differences between the Chinese and English tutors in the following areas, such as the level of care to students, attitude to teaching and student learning effectiveness, and ability to encourage and help students extend and apply knowledge, as well as independent thinking skills.

However, it is worth noting that the researcher isn't simply assuming that all British tutors are fully student-centred, in spite of the views of the participants outlined above (British tutors are more student-centred). In other words, the data collected isn't considered the complete reflection of all learning and teaching approaches adopted in the higher education system in Britain. Even the researcher's own limited experience through studying and working in British

institutions suggest that there are fairly didactic tutors in the British higher education system.

### 10.3.3 Micro level - the personal level

All micro level, or personal level causes are suggested directly by the data collected, and can be summarized as follows: language barriers; cultural differences; a lack of sufficient support at the institutional level prior to and after arriving in the UK; the nature of top-up programmes, the gap between the skills the participants developed in their home institution and the skills they were expected to possess by the UK institution, and also interpersonal issues. As the rest of the causes are already explained in detail in macro level, this section focuses mainly on three areas: language barriers, the gap between skills developed and skills expected, and interpersonal issues.

#### 10.3.3.1 Language barriers

As shown in the previous chapters (chapters three, seven to nine), language barriers appeared to be not only a key challenge Chinese top-up students faced, but also one of the main causes affecting their transition and adjustment. The findings suggest that the language skills of all participants were very weak when they arrived in Britain initially. At the time, the vast majority of participants reported that they were unable to have normal conversations in English, even though all of them passed their IELTS test.

The main reason seemed to be that the participants felt that they weren't prepared sufficiently in the aspect of language skills at the personal and institutional levels when they were studying in their home institution in China. Apart from the fact that there appeared to be a lack of communication between their home institution and the UK institution, the findings suggest this was also the result of the way English language was taught in China. Due to the impact of teacher-centred, exam driven education system, English was taught mainly as a subject, rather than a language. These Chinese top-up students commented that

they weren't provided with a true authentic environment to develop their practical language skills when they were studying in their home institution, and the focus of attention in teaching and learning was on memorizing new words and grammar rigidly, so that they could pass the exams. Consequently, the participants didn't seem to have developed the key essential language skills required such as the size and depth of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and a basic understanding of the common forms of British slang and idioms.

After they arrived in Britain, the participants considered that they weren't provided with sufficient training and language support either. For example, they reported that the Academic English module they were all put on to study didn't truly address the actual needs and expectations of the Chinese top-up students, particularly in the areas such as academic writing and making British friends. Consequently, at the end of this one-year journey, none of the participants believed that they achieved fluency in English, especially speaking - a goal they set for themselves initially, in spite of the fact that their language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) appeared to improve somewhat after living and studying in the authentic environment for a while.

#### 10.3.3.2 The skills developed vs. the skills expected

Through their study experiences in their home institution and this UK institution, the participants said they encountered both a teacher-centred and a more student-centred teaching and learning approach. The data suggest that due to the differences between both approaches, there was a significant gap between the core skill set the participants developed through their Chinese education and the expectations of this UK institution.

While they were studying in their home institution, it appeared that the most fundamental and recognizable skill the participants developed was rote memorization. This is because, as they reported, written exams were the main assessment method used. To pass exams and gain good marks, the participants remarked that they needed to remember the answers provided in advance by



heart and recall them in exams. For instance, Alex said that *“we were given a lot of questions and answers to memorize. Because the exam questions are picked from them, we can get really good marks if we manage to remember all the answers provided”*.

The participants seemed to have also developed fairly good listening skills, and the ability to follow instructions. This may be due to the fact that teachers in Chinese classrooms tend to provide explicit instructions in teaching. The main role of students is to be listeners, and take in knowledge taught (Garrett, 2008).

After they arrived in Britain, most participants reported that they soon realized that the teaching style and tutor expectations were very different in this UK institution, and the study skills they had were unable to help them cope with the new learning and teaching environment sufficiently. This is because in what they perceived to be a more student oriented education system, students were encouraged and expected to study independently. This includes managing their own learning and deciding how they should learn and what they should learn inside and outside the classroom. Consequently, skills and abilities such as time management and organization skills; ability to reflect on their own performance, and ability to be proactive were most essential to their studies.

Nevertheless, since they said they were underprepared while they were in their home institution, all participants seemed to have hardly possessed the skills mentioned above before coming to Britain. They didn't seem to have managed to fully develop these skills during this one-year study either, as they reported that there was a lack of sufficient support and help at the institutional level.

### 10.3.3.3 Interpersonal issues

Current research shows that international students don't tend to socially interact with students of other nationalities, including home students. This view was supported by the findings of this research. Throughout their one-year top-up programme, the vast majority of participants reported that they didn't manage to

make non-Chinese friends. Even though they were living and studying in the UK, their social circle appeared to be comprised of only Chinese students.

The main reason, as the participants commented, seemed to be that the UK institution didn't provide many opportunities for them to get to know other students inside and outside the classroom. Nevertheless, the data appeared to suggest that the participants should also take responsibility for the situation they were in, as many of them said that they didn't make sufficient effort at the personal level either. They didn't seem to have attended many social activities organised by the Institution, and remarked that they were mainly waiting for the other side (home students and other non-Chinese students) to take the initiative in developing new friendships. Consequently, the participants felt that they were unable to become part of local communities, and were having difficulty in truly understanding the local culture and customs. In addition, a lack of proper social interactions with home students seemed to have affected their academic development (please see chapter nine for further details).

For the reasons above, interpersonal issues were not only the challenge and difficulty the participants were facing in this year, but also one of the causes to many other problems and challenges they were facing.

## 10.4 The interrelationship between macro, meso and micro level causes

This qualitative longitudinal research aims to answer the main research question - *“how do the perceptions of Chinese top-up students change as they are transitioning through a regional UK university?”* The findings of this research have supported and reinforced what has been already identified in current research in relation to the personal challenges of Chinese international students. But more importantly, the findings have helped contribute to existing research and literature by providing a richer and much more nuanced analysis of the causes of the challenges and problems a group of Chinese top-up students faced at different

levels. This is because research on investigating the causes in a more comprehensive manner through different analytical levels, such as macro, meso and micro, as well as the interaction between these levels has so far been largely neglected.

As the analysis of causes at all three levels was already provided in the sections above, this section focuses on the interactions between them. Based on the existing literature and the findings of this research, there seems to be nonlinear multi-way interrelationships between macro, meso and micro levels. The students' comments suggest that many micro level causes were provoked by the issues situated at macro and/or meso level, and the meso and/or micro level causes in turn had some significant impacts on the factors identified at the macro level. For example, the way that English language is taught in China (Macro level), as well as a lack of adequate language support at institutional level (meso level) led to poor language skills of the participants (micro level).

Meanwhile, a lack of proper and sufficient understanding of the challenges and issues the Chinese top-up students experienced in Britain (micro level), as described by the participants, strongly affected the way and the level of support the partner institutions provided to these Chinese top-up students (meso level), as well as the reputation of articulation programmes between the higher education sectors in China and the UK (macro level). Therefore, if the comments of the participants are true, the problems this group of Chinese top-up students reported at the micro level are likely to be reduced, if the causes at macro and meso levels can be addressed or improved. The related recommendations are provided in chapter twelve.

## 10.5 Summary

This was the discussion chapter, and addressed the final sub question (SQ) of this study: *what does the data collected suggest about the principal causes of problems and challenges Chinese top-up students face during their transition?* This chapter not only explored and analysed the causes situated at different

hierarchy levels in detail, but also examined the interrelationships between these levels.

As mentioned previously, the overall purpose of this thesis was to gain a profound understanding of the academic and social experiences of the participants while they were studying a one-year top-up programme in this UK institution. The findings suggest that the perceptions and academic behaviours of the participants had changed when they went through the moving in, moving through and moving out stages. However, their social behaviours seemed to remain largely the same all the way through (see chapter eleven for further details).

In this context, the answers to this SQ not only helped explain how and to what extent the macro, meso and micro levels issues affected the perceptions and behaviours of the participants at each key transition stage, but also contributed to the subsequent recommendations to institutional provisions offering top-up programmes to Chinese, and potentially other international students. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out the findings, and the subsequent recommendations are based on the views and comments of a small group of Chinese top-up students studying in one particular UK institution. In this respect, further research is needed to explore the academic and social experiences of Chinese and other international students during their transition in a UK institution.

This chapter included five sections, and was centred around mainly two areas: the causes situated at macro, meso and micro levels, and the interrelationships between these three levels. The macro level causes focused on two areas: articulation agreements and cultural barriers. The top-up programme the participants studied was a particular type of articulation agreement between their home institution and this UK institution. The data suggest that the participants by and large considered this one-year programme wasn't long enough for them to adjust and settle properly in the new environment, due to the fact that there was a lack of sufficient support and help at the institutional level before and after they arrived in Britain. In addition, the participants didn't seem to be so academically gifted compared with other state planned Chinese students.

In addition to language barriers, cultural differences between China and Britain appeared to have had a major impact on social development of the participants, such as making new British friends and integrating into the local community. Meanwhile, Chinese and British people seemed to enjoy very different types of entertainments. Most participants felt that there was so much more to do in China, but the life in Britain was boring. And going to a pub seemed to be the main evening entertainment for the British.

The meso level causes referred to the differences between learning and teaching approaches adopted in their home and this UK institution. While they were studying in China, the participants reported that they were taught largely through a teacher-centred approach. However, almost all participants indicated that they were disappointed with the learning experiences they had in their home institution, since their Chinese tutors were only interested in getting them pass exams, and were unable to keep them interested and engaged in the classroom.

In contrast, the participants felt that the tutors they came across in their top-up programme were more student oriented. Even so, the majority of participants commented that they still found this new approach difficult. This is largely due to the fact that these participants believed that they weren't given enough time and support to adjust to the new approach. They were left alone too soon to cope with their own learning.

The micro causes were focused on three areas: language barriers, the skills developed vs. skills expected and the interpersonal issues. Language barriers of international students are well recognized in existing research. Since they considered that they weren't provided with adequate training and support while they were studying in their home institution, all participants reported that they didn't possess adequate language skills to cope with daily living and academic challenges when they first arrived in Britain. For the same reason, during their time in this UK institution, it appeared that none of the participants really managed to improve their language skills significantly.

In addition, there seemed to be a gap between the skills the participants processed and the skills expected. The skills the participants said they had developed in their home institution included memorization, listening and following tutor instructions. Nevertheless, when they came to Britain, the participants believed that they were expected to become independent learners and engage actively in their learning process. The skills they didn't have, but should have developed, in order to adjust to this new academic environment comprised time management and organization skills; proactive and self reflection skills.

In terms of interpersonal relationships, the data show that most participants had hardly had any social interactions with the locals and students of other nationalities. During the first half of the journey, the participants said they realised that it was much more challenging to make new local friends than what they had imagined. And during the second half of the journey, the participants reported that they wanted to concentrate on their studies, and hence went for a much easier option, that is, socializing only with other Chinese students. The main reason for the situation they were in, as the participants believed, was that the UK institution didn't support them sufficiently or provide the opportunity to help them establish new friendships.

The causes at macro, meso and micro levels seem to be linked closely, and demonstrate nonlinear multi-way interrelationships between them. For example, many issues identified at the micro level were caused by the problems recognized at macro and/or meso level. And some of the causes situated at macro level appeared to be impacted by the problems and issues identified at the micro level.

The next chapter is the conclusions chapter. It provides an overall summary of the key findings of this research, and the answers to all sub questions and the main research questions.

# Chapter Eleven: Conclusions

## 11.1 Introduction

This study set out to explore the personal experiences of a group of Chinese top-up students when they studied a one-year top-up programme in a UK institution. In the introduction chapter it was shown that the experiences of Chinese top-up students were different from other international students in many ways. For example, the top-up programme was only one-year, and these students on the programme were given much shorter time to adjust to the new academic and living environment.

However, current research has paid little attention to this particular group of Chinese international students, in spite of the fact that the top-up entry has become increasingly popular with Chinese students and their families. The findings of this research therefore help contribute to the current literature towards the international student experiences. On the basis of the participants' statements, this research also provides recommendations to the Chinese and UK institutions regarding how they can better support Chinese top-up students prior to and after they arrive in the UK. If the comments of the participants were supported by other evidence, the recommendations might be applicable to other international top-up students, and other UK institutions providing top-up programmes to international students.

The previous discussions chapter explored and answered the final research sub question - *“what does the data collected suggest about the principal causes of problems and challenges Chinese top-up students face during their transition?”* The findings suggested three levels of causes directly and indirectly at the macro, meso and micro levels. Macro level refers to the causes at the national level; meso level refers to institutional level causes; and micro level refers to the causes at the personal level.

This is the conclusions chapter. It synthesizes the answers, and then comes to conclusions to each individual sub question (SQ) and the main research questions (MRQ).

## 11.2 Answers to the sub questions

### 11.2.1 SQ 1: What are the background factors associated with Chinese students studying abroad?

The aim of this sub question was to investigate Chinese students' motivation for studying abroad, in particular, in the UK, as identified in existing research. As shown in chapter two, both push and pull factors were explored in detail. Push factors mainly refer to the factors that are situated in China, such as cultural, economic, and educational factors, which “push” Chinese students to leave home and seek education abroad. Pull factors include the attractions and advantages that are located in the UK, such as language and culture benefits, the quality of the UK higher education, and the potentially better employment opportunities, which “pull” Chinese students towards this particular study abroad destination.

The findings of this study seem to have largely supported what has been identified in existing research. For example, almost all participants said that the main driving force behind their decision about studying abroad was that they didn't do well in the National College Entrance Exams. The related detailed were provided in section 10.3.1.1. In addition, most participants reported that they were unhappy with the teacher-centred, spoon-feeding teaching approach they experienced at their home institution in China (see section 10.3.2.2 for further details).

*[In my Chinese institution], many of my tutors just read the textbooks in class. They rarely had any eye contacts with us and hardly asked us questions. Teachers don't really care if you understand or not. They leave as soon as the class finishes. (Jane)*



*The teaching wasn't interesting at all. There wasn't much interactions in class. Most of times it felt that our tutors were just reading the textbooks. (Alan)*

Most of the pull factors that the participants revealed appeared to also correspond to those discussed in chapter two. For instance, most participants remarked that they viewed this study abroad experience a good opportunity to get to know the outside world.

*I think studying abroad enables me to visit countries outside of China. It is a good and valuable life experience. (Jane)*

*When studying abroad, I get to see different people, and the outside world. This was one of the main reasons that I chose to study abroad. (Laura)*

English speaking environment and the hope for better employment opportunities in China were also among the top pull factors that the participants reported in the interviews.

*I really want to improve my language skills significantly. I want to be able to speak English like a native. (Sophie)*

*I really want to work and live in big cities [in China] in the future, and there are many foreign companies in these cities. In my opinion, it would be much easier to find a job [in these companies] if I had the experience of studying abroad. (Michelle)*

However, another main factor that emerged from the data, but didn't seem to be included in current literature was the specific features of the top-up route, in particular, the duration of the HND programme or international programme offered in their home institution in China.

*I felt that the three-year study in China could build a good foundation and prepare me better for studying abroad. (Daniel)*

*I believe that the three-year HND programme helped me develop independent living skills, and I felt that I was ready by the time that I needed to set off for Britain. Otherwise, I think I might struggle quite a bit if I went abroad three years earlier. (Harry)*

Consequently, the findings of this study indicate that regardless of the duration of the study abroad programme, Chinese international students appear to consider

similar push and pull factors when they are making their decision on studying abroad.

### 11.2.2 SQ 2: What does current literature identify regarding personal challenges for Chinese international students?

China has become the biggest country worldwide distributing international students, consequently, current research on international students has paid a great deal of attention to Chinese students, including the problems and challenges they experience when they study an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in a western university. The most widely identified challenges include cultural barriers, language deficiency, academic challenges, and social adjustment.

The findings of this study appear to support what has already been identified in the literature, as this group of Chinese top-up students reported that they experienced the academic and social problems and challenges mentioned above when they were studying in the UK institution. Among them, language deficiency seemed to be one of the key challenges, and also one of the main causes of the difficulties and challenges the participants experienced in regards to their academic and social development. For example, all participants said that they didn't possess sufficient day-to-day and subject specific vocabularies, and found it very challenging to have proper conversations with others in English.

In the aspect of their academic development, the participants by and large reported that academic writing was the main difficulty they were experiencing. For example, they said that they found it hard to meet their tutor's expectations, and produce an assignment with the required level of criticality relating to assignment writing. In addition, many participants commented that they were having difficulty in adjusting to the more student-centred approach in the UK institution, as well as planning and managing their own learning activities. In the aspect of their social development, social integration seemed to be a major issue, as most participants admitted that they didn't manage to develop new friendships with host nationals.

In addition to language barriers, the majority of participants remarked that they didn't have many opportunities to get to know British students due to a combination of factors, such as a lack of sufficient support at the institutional level and lack of initiative at the personal level.

As a consequence, the findings of this study suggest that Chinese international students on short-term study abroad programmes, such as the one-year top-up programmes offered in the UK institution, seem to encounter similar difficulties and challenges as those who are studying the entire undergraduate degrees abroad. However, as discussed in chapter three and seven, it appeared that it was much harder for the Chinese top-up students to overcome these challenges due to the more compressed nature of their studies, since the duration of a top-up programme was only a year. In this respect, it was highly important for the sending and receiving institutions to provide appropriate support to these students.

### 11.2.3 SQ3: What is the most appropriate theoretical understanding of the issue of transition to use in this thesis?

This research seeks to understand the Chinese top-up students' transition experiences during their time at a UK institution, and the chosen theoretical foundation is the U curve model (Lysgaard, 1955). This model is one of the earliest, and also one of the most popular transition models in the literature. It was proposed by Lysgaard, and was developed further by Oberg (1960). The U curve model suggests that individuals go through four stages during their cross-cultural transition, and they are: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and re-adjustment. The justifications for the appropriateness of the U curve model for this research are provided below.

First, the four transition stages it proposes provide a good and detailed description of a transition process that Chinese students may experience when they go through their entire study abroad journey. Second, although it is commonly categorized as a stress and coping model, the U curve model actually

covers all three perspectives identified in the literature (stress and coping, culture learning and social identification), and gives them an equal attention. For instance, In his report, Lysgaard outlined the difficulties and problems his interviewees experienced in the U.S.; he also stated explicitly that the interviewees who developed the fundamental cross cultural skills, such as learning the new culture, making new American friends, and integrating into the local communities, seemed to have adjusted to the new environment much better than others. And finally, although the ABCs of acculturation model (Ward et al., 2001) also covers these three perspectives, it provides no description of the transition process of the individuals, which was what this study set out to explore.

Even though the U curve model is well cited and very popular in international student transition literature, it has a number of drawbacks, which are summarized as the following. Firstly, the research Lysgaard conducted was only cross sectional, but not longitudinal in nature. However, a longitudinal study is considered more appropriate to gain a good level of understanding of international students' transition. Secondly, Lysgaard has neglected the impact of individual differences (such as age, gender, socioeconomic class and education) and the surrounding contexts (such as the academic setting of the programme, the attitude of home students to international students) on individual transition experiences. Thirdly, Lysgaard didn't provide a clear explanation to a number of important findings. For instance, how and why the Norwegian interviewees moved from one transition stage to another during their time studying and living in the U.S.? And how come those who stayed between 6 to 18 months in the U.S. faced more transition issues than others? And finally, some researchers consider that the linear structure of the U curve is inflexible, since individuals may not go through all stages.

To respond to the criticisms mentioned above, this research adopted the following methods. For example, this is a longitudinal study and data were collected three times throughout the one-year study period of their top-up programmes. In addition, this research has adopted portrait methodology specifically to explore the personal experiences of the Chinese top-up students as the emphasis of this

methodology is on individual differences and the surrounding contexts. Meanwhile, one sub question (SQ6) was dedicated to explore the factors that caused the difficulties and challenges these Chinese top-up students experienced (see chapter ten for further details). Furthermore, this research has used a number of strategies, such as thick description and audit trail to provide the research design and the research process to the reader. In addition, a sub questions (SQ4) was designed specifically to explore whether and to what extent their transition followed the U curve model.

#### 11.2.4 SQ 4: Whether and to what extent does the transition of Chinese top-up students follow the U curve model?

As mentioned above, the U curve model is the chosen theoretical foundation for this study. Existing research has shown that traditionally the U curve model has focused mainly on personal issues (micro level causes), and hasn't adequately captured meso and macro level contexts international students face during their study abroad transition. The findings of this research however suggest that the transition of most participants (11 out of 12) followed the U curve model partially, and was shaped and affected significantly by their surrounding contexts at micro, meso and macro levels at the time. The details are presented below.

##### 11.2.4.1 Following the U curve model partially

Among these 11 participants, most of them (10 out of 11) reported that they experienced the first three stages of the U curve model: the honeymoon, the crisis and the recovery. This was because, as the participants said, it was the first time that they came to Europe or England, and also the first time that they were living alone for a long period of time. The majority of participants commented that they were feeling excited about the new start and were interested in exploring the new environment when they first arrived in Britain, even though they felt that they were underprepared both academically and socially.

As they moved through the first half of their top-up programme, these participants believed that they moved onto the crisis stage. Some of them said that they were feeling lonely and homesick; some said that they were feeling demotivated or stressed; and others said that they were feeling a combination of them. Their comments seemed to suggest that the situation they were in was caused largely by the problems and issues situated at the institutional and national levels. For instance, as discussed in chapter ten (sections 10.3.1 and 10.3.2), there appeared to be some major differences between the Chinese education system and the British education system, and the participants reported that it was very challenging for them to get fully adapted to the more student-centred learning and teaching approach. In addition, these students suggested that the UK institution didn't seem to be aware of the difficulties and challenges they encountered, hence the help and support it provided to the Chinese top-up students didn't truly address their needs or assist them to cope with what they were experiencing.

As they felt that they became more familiar with the environment, and also the top-up programme they were studying, the participants believed that they progressed from the crisis to the recovery stage. Nevertheless, as mentioned in chapter nine, it appeared that these students never moved onto the final readjustment stage, because they reported that they were unable to manage the academic and social situation they were in. For example, many of them said that they still didn't fully understand the British higher education system towards the end of this study abroad journey, and couldn't achieve the academic results they aimed to. In addition, during their time in this UK institution, none of these participants seemed to have developed any new friendships with British students, or integrated into the local communities.

Nevertheless, one participant in particular believed that she went through two stages only: the crisis and the recovery. Even though she was also looking forward to the new life in Britain, Rachel reported that she didn't experience the honeymoon stage. As discussed in chapter seven, this was mainly because she felt that she wasn't prepared sufficiently to deal with the unexpected sudden change of her living environment. Rachel grew up in a very large family, and was

used to sharing a 8-person dormitory with others in her Chinese institution. However, she had to live alone after arriving in Britain.

Rachel reported that she moved onto the recovery stage during the first semester. She said that she didn't feel as upset and depressed as she was since she managed to make some new Chinese friends, and began to share a twin studio room with a good friend of hers. Like the rest of the participants mentioned above, Rachel indicated that she then stayed at the recovery stage for the rest of her journey in this UK institution. This was mainly due to the fact that Rachel said that she never really liked the situation she was in (not having so many Chinese surrounding her) although she had to learn to cope with it.

#### 11.2.4.2 Not following the U curve model at all

In contrast to the rest of the participants, the data suggest the transition of one participant didn't follow the U curve model at all. Daniel believed that his transition in this year was *"more like a straight line"*. He said that he didn't experience any of the transition stages discussed above. As mentioned in chapter nine, his reaction was mainly due to the fact that he said he was a fairly independent person, and had been boarding since he was very young. Besides, it appeared that Daniel was the kind of person who didn't easily get excited or stressed.

For the reasons mentioned above, the findings of this study contribute to the literature by exploring and analysing the issues situated at the higher levels of the hierarchy (such as institutional and national levels), and their impact on international students' transition. Thereby, this study suggests the following: firstly, the U curve model appears to be deficient, and hence needs to be explored further in future studies by taking account of all contexts sitting at different levels, and their impact on the transition and personal experiences of international students, particularly top-up students. Secondly, additional studies need to be carried out to examine whether the transitional experiences of other international top-up students will match the participants of this study. The related recommendations are provided in chapter twelve. And finally, it is worth noting

that since only the transition of one participant was significantly different from others and didn't follow the U curve in the least, more research is needed to explore his transition further in detail.

### 11.2.5 SQ 5: What contributions does portrait methodology make to understanding the perceptions of Chinese top-up students during their transition?

This study set out to gain a deep understanding about how this group of Chinese top-up students felt about dealing with the challenges and issues they experienced academically and socially at each key transition stage (moving in, moving through and moving out) when they were studying a one-year top-up programme in a UK institution. The chosen methodology was portrait methodology, in particular Bottery's variation (Bottery et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013; 2018). The key feature of portrait methodology, as discussed in chapter five, is the production of a written document, or a portrait. It is developed from the interview transcript and aims to be effective in capturing "the thoughts, feelings, and self-reflections of individuals in particular contexts at a moment in time" (Bottery et al., 2009: 83).

The findings suggested that the use of portrait methodology has contributed significantly to understanding the perceptions of this group of Chinese top-up students. This research also makes a contribution to portrait methodology literature by showing that portrait methodology may produce very different results when it is applied to different groups of people. The key benefits of portrait methodology and the contribution of this research to current portrait literature will now be discussed further in the sections below.



### 11.2.5.1 Portrait methodology was more valuable to the participants than using only the interviews and interview transcripts

The aim of portraits in this research was about pulling together the researcher's interpretations of the participants' personal stories at a particular moment in time (for example, at the moving in, moving through and moving stages), and then getting their reactions to these interpretations. Existing research has shown that people like reading stories, and also human brains make more sense about stories than data and plain text (Zak, 2015). The comments of the participants seemed to correspond to the literature. For instance, almost all of them reported that they preferred to read the portraits, rather than the interview transcripts, because it helped them become more aware of the situation they were in, and their surrounding contexts, through gaining someone else's (the researcher's) interpretations of the overview of their entire journey in this year. As a consequence, the participants indicated that they were stimulated to think and reflect on their personal experiences. Their self-awareness and self-reflection could potentially have a significant effect on their later life, especially if they met similar situations.

*The portraits recorded my views and perceptions at that moment in time. By reading them, I am able to review my studies and my life in Britain. I can really see the change of my views and perceptions throughout this year, in particular how I dealt with problems and challenges, and it does get me to think. For example, if I answer these questions again now, what would be my answers? (Harry)*

*The portrait really helped me refresh my memory, and I can now remember quite clearly what has happened when I first arrived in Britain. (Rachel)*

In addition, the participants commented that they felt reading a portrait was much easier and more intuitive than reading an interview transcript, since the former was short but well structured, but the latter was much longer, and unstructured. Besides, the participants remarked that the transcripts only repeated what they said in the interview, and often had too much repetition and "idiosyncratic elements of speech" such as mumbling (Oliver et al., 2005: 1273).

*The interview transcript is long, repetitive and tedious, because it includes everything I said, but the portrait is much simplified. It focuses on the key areas and has no any repetition. (David)*

*The portraits are good and helpful. To be honest, I have forgotten what I said and how I felt at the time, but by reading the portraits, I am able to recall and see how I developed in this year. (Laura)*

#### 11.2.5.2 The credibility and confirmability of the research were enhanced with the use of portrait methodology

As discussed in chapter five, a key feature of Bottery's variation of portrait methodology is to send the portraits back to the participants for comments and feedback. By doing so, the participants of this study were given the opportunity to feed back to the researcher on whether the portraits, especially the assumptions and interpretations of the researcher truly represented what they faced, their ability to cope with the situation, as well as their feelings and views at the time. Almost all participants reported that they were happy with the portraits produced, and very little amendment was needed.

*I can roughly remember what I said in the first interview. My portrait shows exactly what I said, and describes my thoughts and feelings at the time accurately. (Alex)*

*The portrait is good, and has described my feelings and thoughts in great detail. It really helps me refresh my memory. (Laura)*

Based on the benefits of portrait methodology mentioned above, as well as the techniques adopted such as member checking and audit trail (see chapter five for details), this research is able to provide rich information and details about the participants' surrounding contexts at macro, meso and micro levels, and how each individual participant interacted with these contexts when they were transitioning through the moving in, moving through and moving out stages in this year (see chapter ten for details).

In this respect, if a future longitudinal study is going to adopt portrait methodology to study a similar cohort of participants (newcomers, young and inexperienced, and have weak language skills) over a period of time, and also if these

participants aren't provided with the help and support they need adequately, a similar result, as mentioned above, is likely to be developed. However, if this group of students is better prepared academically and socially while they are studying in their home institution, and/or by the UK receiving institution, they may cope with their situation much better than the participants of this research.

### 11.2.5.3 The contribution of the research to current portrait methodology literature

This research makes a contribution to portrait methodology literature by showing that portrait methodology may produce very different insights, and may have different impacts upon the participants when it is applied to different groups of people. For example, previously portrait methodology has mostly been used to research on senior professionals, in particular school principals in Hong Kong and head teachers in the UK (Bottery et al., 2009; 2013; 2018). They are normally intelligent, sophisticated and very experienced. When they encounter difficulties and challenges caused by the surrounding contexts at national, legislative and local levels, these school head teachers have much greater experience in managing the situation they are in. As a consequence, their portraits are able to record and show the strength of their personality and ability to manage a situation (Bottery et al., 2018).

In contrast, this was the first time that portrait methodology has been tested with an entirely new and much younger group of people - Chinese top-up students. Compared with what Bottery has reported (Bottery et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013; 2018), the findings of this research are very different, as the portraits of the participants didn't show the same level of personality as the school head teachers. In fact, their portraits predominately showed their group reactions. For example, since the Chinese top-up students were young, inexperienced, and were still developing their maturity, they were unable to progress properly during this one-year study, and failed to fully manage their academic and social situation.

### 11.2.6 SQ 6: What does the data collected suggest about the principal causes of problems and challenges Chinese top-up students face during their transition?

The findings suggest that there were many different causes to the problems and challenges this group of Chinese top-up students faced during their transition, and they were situated on three hierarchical levels, namely macro, meso and micro. The macro, or national level causes refer to large-scale differences between China and Britain, such as cultural differences, and English language education in China.

The meso or institutional level causes sit between macro and micro levels, and were comprised of medium scale differences and problems identified between and within the partner institutions (the home institutions in China and this UK institution). This included the communication issues between the Chinese and UK institutions, the differences in learning and teaching approaches and a lack of understanding of Chinese top-up students' previous learning experiences in China at the UK institutional side. The micro, or personal level causes mainly included issues the participants experienced as individuals, such as language barriers, the gap between the skills they possessed and required, and interpersonal issues. For instance, the participants reported that in China they mainly developed rote learning skills and the habit to follow tutors' instructions rigidly. However, they felt that they were expected to possess independent learning and critical thinking skills when they came to study in the UK institution. In addition, the majority of participants commented that they hardly managed to establish new friendships with the host nationals or students of other nationalities, as they said that they predominantly socialized with other Chinese top-up students.

Among all these causes, only those at micro (personal) level were suggested directly by the comments of the participants. The causes at meso and macro levels in contrast were largely suggested indirectly by the data collected. For

example, based on what the participants commented, many micro level causes seemed to be the result of the fact that these Chinese students weren't given proper preparations at both partner institutions when they were transferred from one institution in China to another institution in the UK. In this sense, the findings of this research indicate that portrait methodology isn't just about showing personal perceptions only, it can also provide indications of causes beyond the personal level. It is also worth noting that since the findings mainly confirm the micro level issues that has been identified in current literature, the meso and macro level issues that emerged in this study, and are relating to this group of Chinese top-up students need to be explored further and confirmed in future research.

In addition, it appears that there are multi-way interrelationships between these three levels, depending on existing literature (SQ 1 and SQ 2) and the findings (chapter seven to nine). Analysing the causes on only one level would provide one sided, rather than comprehensive answers to this sub question. For instance, some micro level causes, such as their weak language ability, and insufficient skill set seemed to be the result of both meso and macro level causes, such as a lack of sufficient communication between the institutions, and teaching curriculum and style adopted in language teaching in China.

### 11.3 Answer to the main research question: How do the perceptions of Chinese top-up students change as they are transitioning through a regional UK university?

As mentioned in previous chapters, the data were collected at three key stages during their one-year top-up study in this UK institution, namely moving in, moving through and moving out. At the moving in stage, the participants were transitioning into the UK from China. The moving through stage covered the period of time from the start of their top-up programme to the end of their first

semester, and the moving out stage covered the period of time from the start of their second semester to the end of their top-up programme. How the perceptions of the participants changed and its impact on their behaviours at each of these key transition stages are discussed in detail below.

### 11.3.1 Moving in

At the moving in stage, the participants had just arrived in Britain. The whole group of them seemed to have expressed very similar perceptions and behaviours. Since the vast majority of them (10 out of 12) reported that they were at the honeymoon stage of their transition, as outlined above (SQ 4), these participants appeared to be full of excitement and curiosity. They said they were feeling happy and positive towards Britain, British people, and nearly everything they were experiencing. In addition, almost all participants remarked that they set high expectations for themselves. For instance, they were wishing to develop excellent language skills, gain good degree results, and get to know the local culture and British people. Many of them also hoped to make new British friends in this year.

In spite of their enthusiasm, these students didn't seem to have made appropriate academic and social preparations at the personal level for this study abroad journey, such as their language skills, and developing an initial understanding of British culture and education system.

### 11.3.2 Moving through

The perceptions of the participants started to change at the moving through stage. The majority of them commented that they became less positive, more stressed and disappointed with their academic and social experiences. Meanwhile, the participants said that they became aware of the problems with their home institution and this UK institution, and realized that these two institutions didn't facilitate activities that would likely have helped them develop academically and socially in the UK.

The academic challenges and pressure the participants were experiencing appeared to be much greater than what they had expected, and the learning and teaching approaches and assessments seemed to be also very different from their home institution in China. Therefore, the participants by and large reported that they started to wonder whether their goals and expectations, such as getting a 2.1 degree, were realistic and achievable. Socially, due to language barriers, and cultural differences, the vast majority of participants commented that they began to feel life in Britain wasn't as exciting and interesting as they had anticipated after they became familiar with the surroundings. Besides, not having local friends seemed to have prevented these participants from understanding, appreciating and enjoying the new culture and local life properly.

Due to the change of their perceptions, and the impact of some factors such as their personal interest, personal extraversion and introversion, academically the behaviours of the participants also changed at the moving through stage, as they seemed to be taking different paths towards their academic development. Some appeared to be more academically able and adjusted to the environment better than others. But some were already struggling with their studies. Socially the majority of participants seemed to behave as a group. They socialized predominantly with other Chinese top-up students, and were unable to make new British friends.

### 11.3.3 Moving out

At the moving out stage, the perceptions of the participants continued to change. Academically the majority of participants said that they became fully aware of the commitment, effort and skills they were expected and required. They also became more realistic about the type of degree they were able to achieve. Socially almost all participants seemed to accept the situation they were in, and gave up trying to fit into the local society. They were convinced that they were unable to expand their social circle to include non-Chinese students.

Because of the change of their perceptions, academically the behaviours of the participants changed accordingly at the moving out stage. The vast majority of them reported that they became more focused on their academic development in the second semester, and attempted to make much more effort to gain good results. In contrast, socially their behaviours didn't change. All participants once again appeared to keep behaving and acting as a group, and made very little progress at making new friends and fitting into the new local society.

Based on the syntheses provided above, the answer to the main research question (MRQ) is summarized in the table below.

	<b>Moving in</b>	<b>Moving through</b>	<b>Moving out</b>
<b>Perceptions</b>	<p>The participants by and large said that they were full of excitement and enthusiasm, and couldn't wait to start their new life in Britain.</p> <p>In addition, they seemed to set some high expectations for themselves.</p>	<p>The participants reported that they began to notice the problems with their home institution and this UK institution, and the impact on their studies and social life.</p> <p>They said they also started to realize that the studies in this UK institution and social interactions with home students were much harder and challenging than what they had anticipated.</p>	<p>The participants appeared to have had a much better knowledge of the top-up programme, and fully realized the expectations and skills required to complete the top-up programme and to achieve good results.</p> <p>Socially they seemed to have accepted the situation they were in, and gave up trying to fit into the local society.</p>
<b>Academic behaviours</b>	<p>Before coming to Britain, none of the participants seemed to have made sufficient preparations for their future studies.</p>	<p>All participants reported that they encountered many difficulties and challenges, hence started to develop worries and concerns.</p> <p>Meanwhile, it appeared that they began to react differently to their academic development. Even though they felt that they worked harder than when they were in their home institutions, it</p>	<p>In the second semester the majority of participants said that they put much more effort into their studies because they wanted to gain better results to study a master's degree in a better UK institution afterwards.</p> <p>Even so, all</p>



		appeared that none of the participants managed to achieve the goals they set initially.	participants still didn't seem to manage their academic situation.
<b>Social behaviours</b>	Even though the majority of them said they didn't mind the idea of making British friends when they arrived in Britain initially, most participants didn't appear to have managed to do so in this year. They socialized predominantly with the Chinese students, and were unable to integrate into the local society.		

Table 11.1 The summary of the answer to the main research question

## 11.4 Summary

This chapter has come to conclusions on each individual research question. To summarize, while the participants went through this one-year study, their perceptions changed from being overly optimistic towards almost everything in Britain to being more realistic about their studies and life in Britain. This is mainly because they gained first hand experience through direct contact with the new environment, and came to understand that reality wasn't as simple and easy as they imagined. In addition, the participants commented that they realised that they weren't supported sufficiently and appropriately by the UK and home institution to solve the problems and difficulties they encountered academically and socially in Britain.

The change of their perceptions seemed to have a different impact on their behaviours in relation to their academic and social development. Academically their behaviours also changed at each key transition stage. For instance, most participants commented that they didn't take their studies seriously initially, but gradually put in much more effort and worked much harder than before. Nevertheless, they said that because the UK and their home institutions didn't support them sufficiently to develop the ability and skills needed, the participants failed to manage their academic situation in both semesters.

In contrast, socially their behaviours remained largely the same as a group throughout this year. That is, they didn't manage to expand their existing social circle to include new British and other non-Chinese friends. As a result, the

participants said that they were unable to integrate into the local society and understand the new culture properly. As mentioned above, this is largely due to the fact that the participants by and large found it very difficult to break the ice since the UK institution didn't provide the opportunity and support to encourage Chinese and non-Chinese students to mix with each other.

The next chapter is the final chapter of the thesis. It will provide recommendations, areas for future research, as well as identify the limits of this research.

# Chapter Twelve: Recommendations, Limitations and Self-reflections

## 12.1 Introduction

The previous conclusions chapter synthesized the answers and provided the conclusions to all sub questions and the main research question of this research. The findings suggested that the perceptions of the participants, as well as their behaviours in relation to their academic development changed when they went through the moving in, moving through and moving out stages. Nevertheless, their behaviours with regard to their social development remained the same all the way through.

This chapter is the final chapter of the thesis, and contains five sections. The first section outlines the recommendations developed upon the findings of the research. The second section describes the limitations of this research. The third section provides suggestions for future research. The fourth and the final sections are the researcher's self reflections on the two theoretical foundations adopted in the research: the U curve model and the portrait methodology.

## 12. 2 The recommendations

Based on the findings outlined in the previous chapters, this research offers the following recommendations for the UK institution and its Chinese partner institutions, the Chinese top-up students coming to study in this UK institution, and the use of the U curve model. Nevertheless, these recommendations are largely tentative as they are based only on one study of a small group of Chinese top-up students and one particular UK institution. Further research in this area therefore is needed to confirm whether these recommendations can be applied more widely to other UK and Chinese institutions, as well as other international top-up students.

## 12.2.1 For this UK institution and its Chinese partner institutions

### 12.2.1.1 Pre-departure support

If similar findings are reported in future studies in this area, the UK institution and its Chinese partner institutions may consider providing more adequate pre-departure training and support to help Chinese top-up students develop knowledge and skills required to study and live in the UK properly and effectively. This may include providing a proper authentic language environment to help these students practice their English, and also the details about their top-up programme and assessment strategies. In addition, Chinese top-up students should be offered basic knowledge about British style academic writing, and supported to get familiar with the new cultural and social environment.

This is because, as mentioned previously (see chapter three), when the Chinese top-up students came to the UK, they joined directly onto the final year of an existing undergraduate programme in this UK institution. Studying at this level is much more intensive and demanding than the first two years. In this situation, the Chinese top-up students were expected to adjust and settle in the new foreign environment rapidly, to catch up with the existing students and also to meet the academic expectations of the final year.

In order to decide which types of support and training are most appropriate for the Chinese top-up students, the findings suggested that it is important for the receiving institution in the UK and the sending institution in China to keep a close and regular contact with each other, for instance, through teaching observation and being involved in programme design and revalidation process. Even though this may be considered time consuming and generates expenses, it is far more beneficial to both institutions, as the Chinese institution will then have a clearer understanding of the UK institution's expectations, and the academic and social skills it requires Chinese top-up students to possess. The UK institution will

develop a much better awareness of the personal experiences and ability of these students.

#### 12.2.1.2 Ongoing post arrival support

For the same reasons given above, Chinese top-up students, after they arrive in Britain, probably need to be provided with more dedicated and appropriate support at the institutional level than that the participants in this research had received during this one-year period. For example, academically Chinese top-up students may need structured training and assistance to develop their subject related academic writing and other study skills, such as conducting independent learning, and managing time effectively in this more student-centred learning and teaching environment. In addition, it will be helpful if the Chinese top-up students are provided with the information and guidance on British undergraduate degree classification and how to calculate their final degree results.

Socially the UK institution may consider running a buddy scheme to help Chinese top-up students get to know British and other non-Chinese students, and consequently build new friendships with them. This scheme has been adopted by many UK institutions already and seems to be effective in helping international students break down social barriers (Akli, 2012; Mason & Hickman, 2019). In addition, module tutors may need to organise and arrange discussion groups in class so that each group contains students of different nationalities. The UK institution may also consider to promote and attract more Chinese top-up students to take part in social activities, for instance through the use of WeChat (a Chinese social media platform, which is similar to Facebook).

The suggestions mentioned above were mainly for this UK institution, as they were developed upon the findings of this particular research. In order to help other UK institutions running top-up programmes to decide whether this type of support is appropriate for their own international top-up students, further research in this area is needed. Meanwhile, the receiving UK institution should also consider encouraging Chinese and other international top-up students to come

forward and communicate with the Institution directly to give their feedback or raise their concerns. This may be achieved by appointing bilingual or multilingual staff to join the Student Services team, so that international students have the opportunity to speak to the staff in their native language.

### 12.2.1.3 Top-up student recruitment

One of the findings of this research was that this group of Chinese top-up students weren't very academically able, and many of them didn't appear to be very keen and motivated to study. As a consequence, they were unable to achieve a 2.1 degree - a goal that the majority of them set for themselves. For instance, some often left coursework till the last minute; and some didn't make sufficient preparation for their end of term exams (see chapter eight and nine for further details). This view needs to be investigated further in future research with regard to international top-up students. Nevertheless, because the articulation agreements have a tendency to recruit students who don't do well in Chinese National College Entry Exams, as identified in current literature (see chapter three for further details), there is a good possibility that the quality of Chinese top-up students studying in other UK institutions is similar to the participants of this study.

If this is the case, the particular finding of this research then raises an important issue: should UK institutions take on Chinese or potentially other international top-up students who are clearly incapable of working at the academic level required in a different language? UK institutions providing top-up programme may need to look into this issue very carefully. This is mainly because the personal experiences of the Chinese top-up students being researched, as well as the problems and challenges they encountered indicate that this issue hadn't yet been considered and dealt with properly by this UK institution, and these students evidently needed much more help and support during this one-year study.

### 12.2.2 For Chinese top-up students

Chinese top-up students studying in a UK institution, apart from the fact that they need to be provided with more appropriate help, may need to set a more realistic expectation for themselves, such as gaining a 2.2 degree, rather than a 2.1 degree, and also make a better and more sufficient effort at the personal level, if they are to manage their academic and social situation better. For example, prior to and after they arrive in the UK, Chinese top-up students need to consider making more effective use of the training and support offered at the institutional level, and participate more actively in academic and social activities inside and outside the classroom. They should also come forward and make their voice heard about the challenges and problems they face, and the level and type of support they truly need. Meanwhile, it is important for Chinese top-up students to develop and maintain their self-motivation to study, and stay focused.

### 12.2.3 For the use of the U curve model

The final recommendation concerns the use of the U curve model, one of the main theoretical foundations of this research. The findings of this research suggest that the personal experiences of this small group of Chinese top-up students were affected greatly by various factors at macro (the national), meso (the institutional) and micro (the personal) levels. Consequently, the transition of the majority of participants only partially followed the U curve model.

When a future study adopts the U curve model to explore the transition of international students, such as top-up students, particular attention should be paid to examine whether the responses of these students are the same as the participants from this study, and more importantly, to investigate the impact of the contextual factors at all different hierarchy levels on individual experiences, this is because the current U curve model literature has neglected the meso and macro level issues, and emphasized mainly personal level issues.

### 12.3. Limitations of the study

In this research, a number of limitations are identified. Firstly, it only focused on one particular UK institution, and three of its partner institutions in China. This was mainly due to the fact that the sample was selected using a combination of convenience, snowball and opportunity sampling methods (see chapter six for details). Nevertheless, this UK institution had more Chinese partnerships at the time. Besides, there are many more UK institutions offering top-up programmes to international students. Therefore, if I were to do further research in this area, I would explore a different sample group, such as the Chinese top-up students from this UK institution's other partner institutions in China, or the Chinese top-up students studying in a different type of UK institution, such as a red brick university.

For the same reasons mentioned above, the academic and social experiences of the participants, as well as the support and help they received in their home institution and this UK institution may not be representative of that of all Chinese top-up students studying in the UK. However, the findings of this research may shed some light on future research relating to international top-up students' transition (see section 5.4.4 for further details).

And secondly, a power relation naturally existed in this research between the researcher (an academic) and the participants (students), as both parties were from the same academic school at this UK institution. This power relation could have had an impact on the data collected. This potential limitation was recognized and addressed at the beginning of the research process and through the use of portrait methodology. For example, the researcher employed a number of strategies to build and maintain a trust relationship with the participants, such as providing a signed trust document to the participants instead of an informed consent, arranging a pre-interview meeting with each individual participant and providing the interview questions in advance to the participants (see chapter five for further details).



In addition, the portrait methodology allowed, even promoted, the development of a close relationship between the researcher and the participants through the writing of the portraits and getting feedback from the participants. Another important factor that helped reduce the potential problem of a power relation was that the participants realised and acknowledged the fact that the researcher was genuinely interested in the participants and their experiences, and wanted to find out more (see chapter six for further details).

In spite of the limitations mentioned above, the findings of this research indicate that the data collected was sufficient to answer the main research question and sub questions. As mentioned previously, the main purpose of this research was to explore how the perceptions of the Chinese top-up students change while they are transitioning through their top-up programme in a UK institution. And the findings suggest that this one-year top-up programme was highly challenging to this particular group of Chinese top-up students. Because of the impact of the surrounding factors at macro, meso and micro levels, the Chinese top-up students' perceptions and some aspects (academic) of their behaviour changed, but other aspects of their behaviour (social) remained the same when they went through the moving in, moving through and moving out stages.

## 12.4 Areas for future research

Based on the findings and recommendations of this research, the following areas could be explored usefully in future research. Firstly, as this research applied to one regional UK institution only, it would be interesting to see whether the Chinese top-up students studying a top-up programme at other UK institutions demonstrate a similar experience as the participants in this study, and also whether the level of training and support provided at the UK and Chinese partner institution is similar to what has been identified in this research.

The findings of these future studies will potentially help gain a more comprehensive picture of the support mechanisms offered to Chinese top-up students at both the sending and receiving institution, as well as its impact on their academic and social development during this short period of time. Consequently, additional recommendations may be provided to help the transition of Chinese top-up students, and enhance more positive learning experiences.

Secondly, it would also be relevant to conduct further research on Chinese top-up students who possess different characteristics from the participants in this study, in terms of age, maturity, and the level of language skills and academic abilities. It would be interesting to see whether these students demonstrate similar kinds of perceptions and behaviours as the participants in this research.

And finally, as mentioned above, future studies may be carried out to explore whether and to what extent the transition of other Chinese top-up students follows the U curve model when they study an one-year top-up programme in Britain, and also whether and how the surrounding contextual factors, especially those at meso and micro levels affect the transition, and their academic and social development in this year.

## 12.5 Personal reflections on the U curve model

In addition to portrait methodology, the U curve model was the other theoretical foundation for this research. As mentioned in chapter four, the U curve model is probably one of the oldest transition models (1955) in existing literature on international students' transition in higher education. However, there are a large number of other transition models. Many of them are much newer than the U curve model and are also well cited in published research papers. Therefore, it was very important for me to provide strong justifications on why the U curve model was more appropriate for this research than any other transition models. For this reason, a sub question (SQ 3): "*what is the most appropriate theoretical understanding of the issue of transition to use in this thesis?*" was developed purposely, and the related details are provided in chapter four. Put simply, it was

mainly because the U curve model focused on and gave equal attention to all three perspectives of cross cultural adjustment as identified in existing literature. They were stress and coping (problems, issues and challenges); culture learning (cross cultural social skills) and social identification (the balance between the home and host culture). However, almost all other transition models concentrated on only one perspective.

In addition, the U curve model provided an adequate description of a possible transition process the Chinese top-up students may experience when they study their top-up programme in the UK. Meanwhile, this model explored both the academic and social development of the individuals. In contrast, the vast majority of other transition models tended to focus mainly on the social development of international students.

Nevertheless, there are a number of issues raised concerning the appropriateness of the U curve model as a theoretical framework, and they are well documented in the literature (see chapter four for further details). For example, in his published report, Lysgaard didn't provide an adequate explanation on why certain length of the duration (between 6-18 months) had a stronger impact on his interviewees, and also the reasons that prompted his interviewees to move from one transition stage to another. In addition, Lysgaard didn't explore whether and how individual differences and the surrounding contexts affected the transition experiences of the individuals. Besides, his research was cross sectional in nature, even though it set out to explore the transition through experiences of the individuals. And finally, the transition stages proposed are considered rigid, as individuals may not necessarily go through them all.

In order to strengthen the trustworthiness of this research, and better help other researchers decide whether and to what extent the findings of this research may be applied to their own research settings, it was necessary and also critical for me to demonstrate to the reader how this research counteracted the criticisms that the U curve model has received. Among all mentioned above, I felt that some

criticisms were more straightforward to address. For example, I used techniques, such as thick description and audit trail, to provide clear and sufficient descriptions of the research design, the research process and how the data collected was analysed (see chapter five and six for further details).

In contrast, some issues were more challenging to address, for instance, the U curve model was inflexible, and didn't provide the reasons for the movement between one transition to another, and also how and why the individual differences and contexts affected individual transition. In this respect, a sub question (SQ 4) was developed specially - "*whether, and to what extent, does the transition of Chinese top-up students follow the U curve model?*" This SQ was answered in all three findings chapters (chapter seven to nine), and was also summarized in chapter eleven.

Simply put, the findings suggest that the transition experiences of the majority of participants followed the U curve model partially as they never experienced the readjustment stage in the year, and the main reason seemed to be that there was a lack of sufficient institutional level support before and through their study abroad journey.

Based on the findings and the analysis mentioned above, I came to realise that there was another weakness of the U curve model, which hasn't yet been widely identified in current research. That is, the issues and problems the U curve model has recognized are mainly at the personal level (micro level), it hasn't yet paid attention to the issues situated at the larger scales, such as the meso and macro levels, as identified in this research. This means that more research needs to be carried out on whether and to what extent the contextual factors at different hierarchy levels affect the transition experiences of international students.

## 12.6 Personal reflections on portrait methodology

As mentioned already, the methodology adopted in this research was portrait methodology. When I went through the research process, I came to realise

gradually that this was a complex and challenging methodology. Firstly, this methodology has a number of variations, in particular those of Lawrence-Lightfoot's and Bottery's. As described in chapter five, there were some major differences between these two variations in the areas such as portrait subjects, data collection methods, and the relationship between the researcher and the participants.

Consequently, I needed to provide sufficient justifications on why portrait methodology, in particular Bottery's variation was more suitable for this research. For example, even though other qualitative methodologies such as case study and narrative inquiry were adopted regularly in qualitative research to study individuals over a length of time, their focus was often on the entire life span of those being researched. These methodologies tended to use triangulation of data to seek some external truth or reality. The researcher often took the insider's position and actively become a member of the participants' community. This research however aimed to gain a profound understanding of the participants' perceived views at a particular moment in time, and subsequently used semi-structured interviews only to collect data. Even though the researcher had to take a combination of the insider and outside position, due to the fact that she worked in the same academic school where the participants were studying, the researcher developed and maintained an equal relationship with the participants, and aimed to be as faithful as possible to the views and feelings of the participants.

Bottery's variation was felt more suitable for this research mainly because Lawrence-Lightfoot's version shared many similarities with case study and narrative inquiry in the areas such as the researcher's position, and the data collection method. Besides, it mixed the researcher's views with the experiences of the participants purposely. In contrast, Bottery's variation enabled me to create my interpretations of the participants' personal experiences (portraits) based on the analysis of their interview transcripts, but more importantly provided opportunities for me to check whether the assumptions and interpretations made were correct, and subsequently made any necessary amendments to the portraits

accordingly. In doing so, Bottery's variation helped enhance the trustworthiness of this research, and develop the understanding the research aimed for.

Secondly, portrait methodology was relatively new and hasn't yet been widely used. As with case study, Bottery's variation also used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Therefore, it was very important for me to justify the value and advantages of using a combination of portraits and interview transcripts in this research instead of using interview transcripts only.

Thirdly, I was struggling with the writing of the portraits at the early stage of data collection. This was partially because I was new to portrait methodology and had never written portraits before. I didn't have much previous experience to draw upon as I was a new researcher. Additionally, since there were different variations of portrait methodology, and portrait writing is considered the researcher's own "interpretive exercise" (Bottery et al, 2018: 35), there wasn't a dedicated format or structure I could follow. How to describe the personal story of those being researched, and how much the researcher should weave in his or her own interpretations into a portrait were decided by a combination of factors, such as the researcher's philosophical belief, the research question and purpose, and the research design. For example, the portraits developed by Bottery and Lawrence-Lightfoot were very different.

Furthermore, I was facing challenges of working with two different languages during the data collection and analysis process, as the interview transcripts were in Chinese, whilst the portraits needed to be written in English. Even though I have been working in Higher Education in the UK for over 10 years, and am fairly confident in my language ability, I sometimes found it difficult to keep the original meaning of the direct quotes of the participants when translating them from Chinese to English.

For the reasons above, it took me a long time and a few attempts to write my first portrait, but I was getting better at it the more I wrote. Because this research adopted Bottery's variation of portrait methodology, reading the published portraits produced by Bottery was very helpful in particular on how to use the

participants' quotations and how to include my personal interpretations in a portrait.

Fourthly, another major challenge I was facing at the time was that this was also the first time that portrait methodology was used to study a very different group of people, compared with the research conducted by Bottery and Lawrence-Lightfoot. As mentioned already, the participants of this research were young, inexperienced and still growing up. When they were facing problems and challenges in this year, they didn't have much life and work experience to draw on, since they hardly left home or worked before coming to Britain. In this context, in order to encourage the participants to become more open and engaging, and also help them feel more relaxed throughout the research process, it was highly important for me to build trust and develop a close relationship with the participants.

In addition to the strategies mentioned in the section above, I used WeChat to keep a regular contact with the participants, for example, checking how they were getting on with their studies and daily life in Britain; sending holiday wishes, and giving them suggestions on holiday destinations and local customs. Meanwhile, I believed the factors, for example, I was Chinese and was able to interact with the participants in Chinese, were also very helpful.

As a result, I was getting more involved with the participants, and they also felt that I genuinely cared about them and didn't treat them simply as research participants. Subsequently, I had much better conversations with the participants at the moving through and moving out interviews. They were much more frank and talked more freely. In fact, many of them commented that they actually enjoyed chatting to me, and felt it was an effective way to de-stress themselves.

An associated challenge I encountered at the start of data collection was in relation to conducting research interviews, in particular probing interviewees in the interviews, since I had no previous experience in this area. I got better at it gradually. On the one hand, I had opportunities to practice my interview techniques in the pilot interviews, and received feedback from the pilot

participants. On the other hand, being able to meet the participants at the pre-interview meetings and come to know them briefly before the first set of interviews helped me relax and ease the feeling of nervousness. In addition, conducting the interviews in Chinese - my native language also proved to be helpful, since I was able to avoid confusions and misunderstandings caused by language issues.

And finally, I came to realise that writing portraits was a very time consuming process. This was partially because this was a longitudinal study, and I needed to produce 36 written portraits in total. In addition, I went one step further and translated the portraits from English to Chinese when sending them back to the participants for comments. This was based on the consideration of the participants' weak language skills.

Looking back, if I were to do this research again, I would make the following changes, so that this research might gain richer and clearer data, and further improve the trustworthiness of its findings. For instance, I would explore more specifically the perceptions and behaviours of the participants, and subsequently ask the interview questions such as *“why you think your academic behaviour changed but your social behaviour didn’t?”*, *“Why did your perceptions change significantly in this year?”* and *“why are your perceptions changing (or not changing) your behaviour?”* The reason is that the findings of this research suggest the perceptions of the participants changed when they went through this one-year study in the UK. In contrast, only some aspects of their behaviour changed (academic behaviour), but other aspects (social behaviour) remained the same.

I would also explore the pre-departure and after arrival stage separately, and conduct the moving in interviews before the participants left China. This is because the evidence indicates that the pre-departure support, as the findings of this research suggest, had a direct and significant impact on the transition experiences of this group of Chinese top-up students. In addition, while they were in China, the participants were in a more familiar environment, hence might be



feeling more relaxed and comfortable with expressing their feelings and opinions (Bolderston, 2012). Meanwhile, the participants might have a better memory of their personal experiences in their home institution, as there was a time gap (several months) between completing their programme in China and setting off to Britain.

And finally, I would change the research process from three stages (the moving in, moving through and moving out stages) to four stages by including the reflections on the process. In fact, this four-stage research process will be a recommendation to future researchers, in particular new researchers, who wish to use the portrait methodology to explore the individual experiences of international top-up students in depth. The purpose of the final stage is to emphasize how important it is to investigate the impact of the first three stages on the participants, and also to increase the trustworthiness of the data collected by going back and talking to the participants. Nevertheless, adding the fourth stage to the research process wasn't something that I anticipated initially, and I only realised it when I came to the end of this research study.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 Portrait examples

### Laura's moving in portrait

This is Laura's moving in portrait, the first portrait I have produced for her. It was developed from the transcript of her moving in interview, which took place at the end of July in 2015. The interview was conducted in Chinese, which, as Laura commented, helped the communication: *"when you speak to me in Chinese, I can understand you very well. However, if you were speaking to me in English, I am sure I would either misunderstand you or wouldn't understand you very well during our conversations"*. When the interview took place, Laura had only been in the UK for just over a week and had just begun to study an 8-week pre-session course. She was from a city in South China, and she was the only child in the family. However, she said she had an aunt who was living in Australia. Laura came to the UK institution to study a top-up programme (Business Management and Tourism), which would start at the end of September 2015.

Laura was introduced to me by a friend of hers, who was one of my pilot participants. Laura told me that they both studied in the same home institution in China. I started contacting Laura via WeChat (a Chinese social media platform) while she was still in China. This initial contact helped us get to know each other and seemed to have helped me build a trust relationship with Laura, as she recalled, *"it was useful to have the contact on WeChat. I felt that it was much better to get to know each other first than having the interview straightway"*.

### About the moving in interview

The moving in interview was the first interview I conducted with Laura. Prior to the interview, I met her for the first time in person in the informal meeting that I had organized. As we had already had the contact through the social media beforehand, we seemed to bond with each other quickly and naturally. The actual interview took place on a Wednesday afternoon. We were going to use the communal kitchen in her accommodation, as Laura said that she didn't have classes on Wednesday afternoons and suggested to meet up in her accommodation. However, the kitchen was already occupied by a housemate and her friends. Fortunately, the staff car park was next to her

accommodation, we then moved to my car to do the interview, this was to ensure that we had a quiet and undisturbed environment.

As it was late afternoon, the car park was very quiet. Having the interview in the car turned out to be surprisingly comfortable and relaxing, as I felt that it created a casual environment, and allowed us to sit comfortably. Laura seemed to agree with my opinion and commented, *“it was rather nice to do the interview in your car. It felt much quieter than my kitchen. I felt that we had a very nice chat”*. As a result, this interview went for nearly two hours, and it was probably the longest among all the moving in interviews I conducted. During the interview, we both shuffled around regularly to make ourselves sit more comfortably.

## Her pre-departure experience and background

### *Laura’s experience in her home institution in China*

Before coming to the UK, Laura told me that she studied a three-year international programme (Hotel Management) in her home institution (CU3) in China. Year one appeared to be focused on English training, and years two and three were focused on the subject related modules. Laura said students were also put on compulsory IELTS language training sessions in the final year. She recalled that Hotel Management was a small subject area and *“there were only four students”*. As the result, she said that when they were in year two, they had to share some modules *“with the students from the previous cohort. And even so, there were only 20 of us in total”*. In this context, Laura said *“[my institution] was very strict about attendance”*. For example, she mentioned that her tutor *“would phone the student”* if any of them didn’t turn up on time in a class.

Looking back, even though Laura admitted that *“I have learnt something in year two and the final year”*, she told me that she didn’t have a high opinion of this three-year study experience, and considered the quality of the program *“was low”*. Laura appeared to be particularly unhappy with the English training she had in year one, because she said, *“my English level wasn’t improved at all”*. The main issues, as Laura recalled, were as follows. Firstly, she said, *“the teaching style was the same as high school, and the teaching was focused mainly on English grammar”*. For example, Laura remembered that she had to complete exercises such as *“dictating English words”*, *“translating sentences”* and *“filling in the blanks”*. She felt that she was taught mainly to *“memorize”* and learn words and grammar *“by rote”*, rather than *“skills or techniques”* to help her prepare for the

IELTS test. In this respect, Laura believed that she didn't really understand English grammar and tended to *"forget [what I was taught] quickly"*. Because she was so unhappy with the experience, Laura told me at the time that she was hoping to *"get through [these three years] quickly so that I can go abroad"*.

### *Laura's connection with Australia*

Laura told me she had a short experience living in Australia. She said when she was in upper secondary school, she visited her aunt who *"emigrated to Australia"* a long while ago and was living in Melbourne. Laura said she then *"stayed with my aunt for nearly a month"*. She mentioned that her aunt really wanted her to *"come to study in Australia, and potentially settle in permanently"*. However, Laura remarked that she *"doesn't like Australia"*, because the country *"is too quiet"*. Melbourne as she recalled, felt a little bit like *"a lonely village"*. In addition, Laura said, *"since I have already been to Australia, I would like to try somewhere new and different"*. In fact, Laura remarked that *"I'm not interested in emigrating to any country"*. Laura told me that *"I'm not considering emigrating to any country, because my mum doesn't want me to"*.

### **A strong desire to study abroad**

Even though she said she wasn't keen to live in another country permanently, Laura told me that she always had a strong desire to study abroad. This was because she believed that studying abroad *"has many advantages"*, for instance, *"I can improve my English and become more independent"*, and *"get to know people from different cultures"*. However, Laura said she kept her thoughts to herself, and *"didn't want to tell my mum initially"*, since she felt that *"studying abroad is expensive"*. However, because she was feeling so strong about it, Laura said she eventually *"talked to my mum about it when I was in university"*, who then granted her request. In fact, Laura admitted that she *"had study abroad in mind"* when she decided to study the international programme in her home institution in China.

### **Her pre-departure preparations for the top-up programme**

Laura seemed to believe that her home institution and the UK institution didn't really help her prepare for this study abroad journey well. As mentioned above, Laura reported that her home institution in China didn't truly help her develop her language skills, that is, the ability to utilize the language properly in real life situations. The teaching appeared to be following the traditional Chinese style, even though Laura said the international

programme was designed to prepare them for the forthcoming study abroad journey. On the other hand, Laura reported that the UK institution didn't provide much information to the Chinese students either: *"the agents of the UK institution didn't appear to be enthusiastic. They only came to speak with us once, and just briefly introduced the institution. It felt as if they didn't care whether we would come"*.

The main preparation Laura made at her personal level, as she described, seemed to be asking me and a friend of hers questions on social media. Laura told me that she was keeping in touch with a friend who came to study in the UK institution a year earlier than her. This friend was also studying the Business Management and Tourism top-up programme. Laura said this friend provided her with information such as *"the university environment"*, and also told her that *"tutors here are all very friendly"*. In addition, Laura said she had a quick look at *"the ranking of the University"*. Nevertheless, Laura didn't appear to have gained sufficient information about her top-up programme. This is mainly because, as she explained, *"I don't have the timetable [for the new academic year], and don't know what modules are included [in my programme]. I think I should at least be offered some directions"*. Nevertheless, Laura seemed to have set high expectations for herself: *"I would like to achieve a 2.1 degree"*.

### *Her pre-departure worries*

Prior to coming to the UK, Laura said she was nervous and really worried about living in Britain and had asked me questions regularly in this area via WeChat. One of her main concerns appeared to be her future accommodation. Laura told me that the pre-sessional course accommodation was pre-allocated for them, however, Chinese top-up students were required to make their decision and pay for the accommodation fees before leaving China if they wanted to live in accommodation provided by the UK institution when they were studying their top-up programme. For example, some of the questions she asked me included the type of accommodation the UK institution was providing, and their distance to the campus; the differences between the size of the rooms, and how to contact the Accommodation Office. Laura was also concerned with the airport pick up, because she said, *"how will I find the university staff in the airport"?*

In addition, Laura was worried about her language skills. She told me that *"my reading skills are OK, but my speaking skills are really poor"*. This was because, as she explained, when she was in her home institution in China, she *"hardly had the opportunity*



*to speak English*". In this respect, Laura was concerned with "*whether I would understand [others]*" and "*whether I would be under pressure [to speak]*".

I did not have the answer to most of her questions at the time, because I wasn't responsible for looking after the top-up students, but I spent time to look for the answers or direct her to relevant offices for help. Laura seemed to appreciate the effort I had made, which then helped gain her trust: "*I feel that I can trust you, because you are so kind and helpful. You seem to know the institution very well and provided a lot of useful information to me on accommodation, how to study, and many other areas*".

### Her initial transition experience in Britain

Since she arrived in Britain, Laura seemed to have experienced the honeymoon stage of the U curve model. She said she had a very positive first impression of the country, and commented that "*everything was new and different. I enjoyed the new environment because I like to discover new things and like to travel around*". In addition, Laura reported that she felt relieved and more relaxed, as she believed that living in Britain wasn't as hard as she had anticipated. She mentioned that she considered "*living in Britain is much better than living in Australia*". For instance, Laura commented that the host city "*is small, but beautiful, and is suitable for living*". In fact, Laura admitted that she preferred the host city "*when I was in year two in [my home institution]*", because she said she was interested in travelling, and discovered that "*this is tourist city*". In addition, compared with Melbourne in Australia, Laura felt that the host city "*is full of people*", which didn't make her feel "*lonely*". However, Laura said she noticed, "*the crowd is normally in the city centre*", but not anywhere else. In this respect, Laura reported, "*I am a bit wary of going out in the evening*", as she felt that "*it may not be very safe*".

Laura reported she was also pleased with her pre-session course accommodation, because "*it is very close to the campus*". The only drawback, as she described was that "*my room is a bit small and has no good soundproofing*". For example, Laura told me that "*I can hear people next door wash hands*", also when people "*are talking outside my window, it sounds as if they are talking inside my room*".

In addition, Laura commented that one area that she was happy with, but was very different from what she had expected was food. While she was in China, Laura said that she was told by many people that "*you are not going to get used to British food, it is tasteless*". However, she said she felt that "*every single meal is tasty*", and Laura

particularly liked *“chocolate and milk”*, because they were *“cheap and delicious”*. The only downside, in her opinion was that *“it is too expensive to eat out, as I have to spend at least £10 every time”*.

Apart from the living environment and food, Laura reported that the university staff she had contact with were very friendly, and *“patient”*. Since she arrived, Laura told me that she had attended several meetings in relation to accommodation, and GP registration, and these staff *“knew what we wanted to say, even though we often couldn’t express ourselves [in English] clearly”*.

## Her initial observation of cultural differences between China and Britain

Laura seemed to be very observant and told me that she *“noticed cultural differences”* in many areas since her arrival. For instance, she said, *“getting a taxi in Britain is inconvenient, because I have to always book one in advance when I need it, I can’t hail a taxi on the street”*. Therefore, she said she would rather walk most of the time, and *“is unable to go to places that are too far [to walk]”*. Laura also noticed that *“nobody uses an umbrella on the street”*. She recalled that on the day she arrived, *“it was raining quite heavily”*. To her surprise, *“only me and my friend were using umbrellas, but nobody else”*. Especially those women, she added, *“their hair was completely wet”*.

In addition, Laura reported that she had some difficulties with *“British coins”*. For example, she commented, *“one naturally thinks the bigger coins represent more value”*, however, in Britain, *“it is rather strange”* since 1p and 2p coins *“are very big”*, but 5p coins *“are very small”*. As a result, Laura remarked that it often took her a while to find the right coins when she was shopping in the supermarket. Sometimes she said she had to ask for help from the cashier, who then told Laura *“to empty my coin wallet and she will find the right ones for me”*.

## The initial impression of the pre-sessional course

When this interview took place, Laura said she had only been on her pre-sessional course for a few days but started to notice *“the teaching style in Britain is very different”*, for example, it was focused on *“group discussions”*. However, in her home institution in China, she said, *“the teaching style wasn’t like this at all”*. As she explained, *“there wasn’t much interaction between students, and we are never asked to express our opinions in*

class". At most, she added, *"the tutor would call your name if she or he wanted you to answer a question"*. Even though she only just came in contact with group discussions, Laura commented she began *"to like this new style"*, which seemed to have a number of advantages. Firstly, she said, *"this way time goes much quicker and I feel I engage better in class, because we are all involved in the discussions"*. Secondly, Laura commented that *"listening to others help me gain different opinions and broaden my mind"*. And finally, she believed group discussions *"provided me with more opportunities to speak English", and hence "help improve my confidence"*.

However, Laura recalled that she felt a bit uncomfortable and *"a bit shy"* at the beginning, because *"all my pre-sessional course classmates are Chinese"*, and *"it is feeling so strange and awkward to speak English with other Chinese students"*. Nevertheless, Laura told me that *"we soon get used to it"*, because *"we have group discussions in every single class, and our language tutor doesn't allow us to speak in Chinese [in class]"*, besides, she said *"I notice our level of English skills is very similar, and hence, I am not feeling so pressured to speak with them in English"*.

## Main challenges and difficulties

In spite of her positive first impressions, Laura reported that she encountered some challenges in the first week. Some were academic related, and others were about living habits. Her main concern seemed to be related to her pre-sessional assessment, as she told me that part of it was writing an academic assignment, and *"we were just given the assignment brief"*. This was largely because, as Laura explained, she never wrote one before in her home institution in China. Currently she said she already had a discussion with her language tutor, and *"is feeling the pressure"*. As she remarked *"the direction my language tutor pointed out was very different from what I had in mind"*. As a consequence, Laura said she completely lost her confidence and *"doesn't know what to write"*. Laura reported she was also feeling puzzled and uncertain about whether Business Management and Tourism was the right subject area for her. As mentioned already, Laura said she had to switch to this new subject for her top-up programme because Hotel Management was not an option in the UK institution.

As mentioned above, Laura was worried about her language ability before coming to Britain. However, she said the reality was better than what she had anticipated, since she *"has no problem understanding my language tutors"*, and *"is comfortable with their speaking speed and accent"*. To her surprise, she said that she found it difficult to

understand some of her Chinese classmates, since they “*speak English with their strong local Chinese accent*”.

In addition, Laura commented that she wasn’t used to “*having a very short lunch break*”, as it was only an hour, however, in contrast, the lunch break she had in her home institution in China “*was two hours*”. Therefore, she said, “*I have to rush out to have a quick lunch*” before the start of the afternoon’s session”. Besides, she added, “*I am feeling very tired and sometimes sleepy in the afternoon and have to go to bed very early in the evening*”.

### Her future plans

Currently Laura said she had not yet decided whether she would continue to study a master's degree, as she “*wants to wait for her assessment results*” before making the final decision. Laura told me that “*it is entirely up to me*”, since there was no pressure coming from her mum, who only suggested her “*to wait and see how well I am getting on with my studies*”. Nevertheless, Laura said, “*my grandma wants me to go home straight away after finishing the top-up programme*”, because “*she feels two years is a bit too long*”.

If she was to study a master’s degree, Laura said she would “*change my subject area*”, since she told me that her mum believed that “*there are less employment opportunities [for Hotel Management and Tourism]*”. Besides, Laura felt that “*Hotel Management is a career for young people*”, which she considered not a long-term solution for her. In addition, Laura believed that “*there are limited promotion opportunities [in this industry]*”. As a result, Laura said that her mum wanted her to change to study “*subject areas such as Business Management*”, which were “*much broader and easier to find a job*”.

Laura said she would also consider “*studying in a much better ranked UK institution*”, because she told me that she knew the academic ranking of this UK institution “*is not so good*”. As she explained, “*I have different expectations [for the top-up programme and the master’s degree]*”. The purpose of the top-up programme, in her opinion, was to “*lay a foundation for future postgraduate study*”. Therefore, she said “*it is OK to study my top-up programme in an institution with a much lower ranking*”. In addition, she felt that “*there are no major differences between universities that are ranked below 30*”. Furthermore, she considered that “*it is impractical to study in a good university straightaway*”, because “*I am not good enough*”.

After finishing her studies in Britain, Laura remarked, *“I will definitely go back home to look for a job”*, ideally, in city X in China. She told me that this city *“is famous in Hotel Management Industry”*. Laura recalled that she became really fond of it when she visited the city with her tutor when she was studying in her home institution in China. However, Laura noted that she would have to rely on her own to sort out a job if she wanted to stay in X, because her family *“will not be able to help me, for nobody in my family is in this profession”*.

## Conclusion

This was the first portrait I produced for Laura, and her feedback on this portrait is covered at the start of the moving through portrait. Through the moving in interview, I have picked up the following key points which I would like to explore further in the forthcoming moving through interview. Firstly, what kinds of support and help the UK institution provided to the Chinese top-up students before their departure, since Laura mentioned that she didn't make sufficient preparations for her top-up programme before departure. After the moving through interview, the related information was added back to this portrait, as it was related closely to her moving in experience.

Secondly, did she switch to a different subject area? If so, how did she feel about the new programme? If not, what was her current view on the Business Management and Tourism programme? This was because Laura mentioned that she was uncertain about the programme route she had chosen for her top-up programme. Thirdly, her reactions and feelings about the unique interview location, as this interview was conducted in an unusual location. The related feedback was added back to the first section of this portrait (about the moving in interview). And finally, the impact of her under preparations on her top-up programme, since Laura mentioned that she didn't manage to make much preparation for the top-up programme.

## Laura's moving through portrait

This is Laura's moving through portrait, which was developed from the transcript of her moving through interview. It took place at the end of January 2016. At the time, Laura had completed the first semester of her top-up programme. She told me that she achieved some good results, but didn't manage to meet the goal she set, that is, achieving an average mark of 60.

## About the moving through interview

This interview was focused on exploring Laura's academic and social experiences in the first semester, and took place on a sunny Monday afternoon. As with the moving in interview, this interview was conducted in Chinese. I booked a small interview room for us as Laura had a lecture beforehand, and she said that it was more convenient for her to attend the interview on campus. This interview went very well, and it appeared that we both enjoyed our conversations. Laura seemed to be happy to provide me with a lot of information through our conversations, and I felt that I often didn't need to probe since she seemed to be so eager to chat. This might be because we had got to know each other better. I kept contact with Laura throughout the first semester mainly via WeChat, for example, checking how she was getting on with her studies and life, sending her holiday wishes, and answering her questions. I also gave her a small Christmas present. In addition, it might be because I was getting better at conducting interviews (please see chapters eleven and twelve for my self-reflection on building and maintaining trust with the participants, and on my interview skills).

## Feedback about her moving in portrait

Prior to the interview, I emailed Laura a copy of her moving in portrait in Chinese, the moving in interview transcript, and also the moving through interview questions. At the start of the interview, I asked her feedback for the portrait and the interview transcript first. Laura told me that she read both documents, and commented particularly on the portrait. She said the portrait was "very good", because "*it truly described how I felt then*", and "*brought back a lot of memories*". By comparing her feelings and experiences at the moving in and moving through stages, Laura reported that her current feelings and thoughts were "*very different from the time when I just arrived*". For example, she said that "*I was feeling so naive then. Even though I didn't really know what it was going to be like living and studying in this Institution, and had some worries, I was happy and really*

*looking forward [to the new start]*". After she had completed the first semester, Laura believed that *"I am a bit more mature now. I have some basic ideas about my studies and life, and at least know what I should do for my next step"*. In addition, Laura seemed to have changed her views on a number of things, for example, the subject, the independent living abilities, and expectations to her results. All of them are explained in more detail in the following sections.

## Her perceptions at the moving through stage

Laura reported that after she began to study her top-up programme and had a proper contact with the education system, her perceptions regarding her academic development changed compared with the moving in stage. For example, Laura said the top-up programme was much more challenging than what she had expected: *"I knew it was going to be challenging [to study the top-up programme], but I didn't realize it was going to be this hard"*. She told me that she faced challenges in academic writing, dealing with the academic pressure and intensity. In addition, Laura said she faced difficulties in understanding her tutors, and sometimes British classmates in the classroom. As a consequence, Laura reported she began to feel depressed and disappointed *"soon after the start of the top-up programme"*, and started questioning *"have I made the right decision to study abroad"?*

Looking back, Laura believed the difficulties and challenges she was experiencing in the first semester were caused by a combination of reasons, such as language barriers, the differences between the Chinese and British education systems, the learning and teaching style, and also a lack of proper institutional level support before and after she arrived in the UK. For example, she recalled that *"before we left China, the UK institution only came to our home institution once, and the staff didn't stay long. There wasn't enough time for us to ask questions properly after the talk. However, another partner UK institution came to speak with us three times"*. In addition, Laura commented that *"we weren't provided with sufficient information, such as the academic timetable when we were on our pre-sessional course. I had no idea when the holidays would be, when each term finishes. I tried to search the information on the website, but I found nothing. However, my friends who are studying in a different UK institution were provided with the whole year academic timetable when they were on their language course, so that they could plan their time much better"*.

In contrast, her perception in relation to social development appeared to remain the same. Laura said that she wanted to know British students and make friends with them, but didn't manage to do so, even though she reported that she had plenty of opportunities in the first semester. (please see the section social development for further details).

## Her transition experience at the moving through stage

Laura considered that her transition process at this stage followed the U curve mode. As mentioned in the previous portrait, Laura reported that she experienced the honeymoon stage when she just arrived in Britain. However, she felt that progressed to the crisis stage during the first semester. For example, Laura said she started to feel depressed soon after the start of the top-up programme, because *"the content was much harder than our pre-sessional course"*. The former *"was much more academic focused"*, but the latter *"was quite simple, and was focused on teaching English grammar and basic academic writing skills"*. Laura then moved into the crisis stage, as she recalled *"when I started writing my first academic assignment in mid semester"*. At the time, she added, *"I felt that I was under a lot of pressure, and was in a very low mood"*. This was because *"there were too many to write, and I didn't really know how to write an academic assignment"*. As a result, Laura said, *"I was very unhappy and began to wonder whether I made the right decision to study this top-up programme in Britain"*.

The academic pressure she was under seemed to be due to the fact that Laura didn't have any practice or training on academic writing before coming to Britain. In addition, even though she wrote a short assignment prior to the start of her top-up programme, which was part of her pre-sessional course assessment, Laura reported that it was only helpful in terms of *"learning how to do academic referencing properly"*, and *"how to write an introduction and conclusion"*. However, the key part Laura felt where she really needed help was *"how to write critically"*. She mentioned that both her language and module tutors *"kept mentioning the word 'critical thinking', but didn't tell me how"*.

## Language skills

Laura believed that her overall language skills *"might have improved, but not significantly"*, even though she felt that her writing skills *"have become stronger, since I have written many assignments already"*. One of the main challenges Laura reported was the difficulty in understanding her tutor's accent. She told me that she had a tutor in the



first semester who she thought *“might be from India”*, and *“had a very strong accent”*. Laura recalled when she was asking this tutor for feedback on one of her draft assignments, *“I could only understand the last sentence. Most of the time I just replied to her with ‘ye, ye’”*. In comparison, Laura said, *“I think it is much easier to understand Chinese people’s English”*, even though she claimed, as mentioned in the previous portrait that she couldn’t understand some of her Chinese classmates’ English while she was studying the pre-session course. For example, she told me that she also had a Chinese tutor in the first semester, and *“I had no problem at all understanding her”*. Her comments suggest the change of perception might be due to the following reasons. First, as Laura mentioned, her language tutors tended to slow down their speaking speed for Chinese top-up students as a main purpose of the pre-session course was to help these students improve their language skills. And second, at the time when the moving in interview took place, Laura didn’t seem to have had any contact with non-Chinese students and subject module tutors.

In addition, Laura reported that she had problems in understanding *“the specialist subject vocabulary”*, and *“have to check up these words regularly in class myself”*. She mentioned that *“our tutor hardly explains them in class”*, as she believed it was mainly because *“the home students already know the meaning of these words, only I don’t”*.

It appeared that the lack of development of her language skills was partially because Laura had limited contacts with non-Chinese students. The related details are provided in the section below (social development). In addition, Laura said she was dissatisfied with the language training and support provided by the UK institution. She told me that all Chinese students were enrolled on an Academic English module in the first semester. In her opinion, *“this module was very boring, and wasn’t useful at all”*, since *“there was no teaching involved, and I didn’t really have much to do in these classes”*.

## Academic experience

At the end of the moving through stage, Laura completed the first half of her top-up programme, and reported that she was actually enjoying the programme she was studying, even though she was uncertain about whether Tourism was the right choice when she first arrived in Britain. Her change of perception seemed to be due to the following reasons. Firstly, Laura said, *“I really like travelling, and the programme has organized a few trips already for us”*. Secondly, Laura said, *“I feel that I have learnt some very interesting knowledge and information through my modules”*. And finally, Laura

commented that the tutors teaching on Tourism modules *“are good at teaching”*. For example, *“they always use many examples to help us understand the key points or content”*. Even so, Laura told me that she experienced many academic challenges and difficulties in the areas such as language (see the section above), the British education system, learning and teaching style, and academic writing. This might be because, as mentioned in the moving in portrait, Laura didn't seem to have made sufficient academic and social preparations before departure.

### *The impact of the Chinese teaching style, and a lack of sufficient preparations on her studies*

Laura mentioned that *“one of the main challenges I am facing is how to be more actively involved in class activities”*. For example, she said, *“I am OK to have a chat or conversation with others in small groups, however, it is extremely hard for me to raise my hand to ask the tutor questions or answer questions in front of others in class, because I feel very nervous and embarrassed”*. As she believed, this was mainly because of the teaching style she experienced in China: *“we hardly had any practices, since we were told to listen to the tutor and not to interrupt his/her teaching”*.

In addition, Laura seemed to be unfamiliar with the assessment policy and rules of the UK institution. For instance, she told me that she received a 40 for an assignment, only because *“I submitted it 5 mins later than the deadline”*. As the result, she said the module tutor *“capped my mark as 40”*. Laura commented that *“I am feeling very angry and upset about it”*, since *“tutors in Britain are not very considerate, and students are purely judged by the assessments presented”*. However, in her home institution, the situation seemed to be very different. As Laura recalled that *“in addition to the final exam results, we were also given tutor's impression mark, that is, how the tutor felt about us as students. This mark counted 30% of our overall mark, and I always received 100% for this part”*.

### *Assignment writing*

Laura reported that academic writing was probably the biggest challenge she was experiencing in the first semester. One of the problems she mentioned particularly was in relation to critical thinking: *“this term has been mentioned to us regularly by the language tutors, and our module tutors. However, I don't know the meaning of critical thinking, because no one has really explained it to us properly”*. In addition, Laura remarked she didn't know *“how to meet tutors' expectations”*. When she was given the assignment

brief, Laura said *“I know the tutor must have her own standard and expectations, which she will use to assess and mark our assignments”*, however, Laura added, *“she never told us even when I asked her directly about her expectations. All she said was to read through the powerpoints and figure things out myself”*. Furthermore, Laura said she found it hard to cope with the deadlines: *“I didn’t realize the deadlines were this close to each other. I felt that all I did in the second half of the first semester was working on my assignments”*. For example, Laura added, *“we practically had to write one assignment on a weekly basis, since many of them needed to be handed in before the end of December”*.

The challenges she was experiencing appeared to be partially related to her weak language skills, as Laura commented, *“my English grammar is very poor. I don’t know how to paraphrase a sentence, often only change a couple of words in a sentence if I have to”*. In addition, it might be because she said that she had never had the experience of writing academic assignments in her home institution, which was one of her main worries before the start of the top-up programme.

In spite of the challenges mentioned above, Laura told me that *“my writing speed has certainly improved. [For example], I can now write 1000 words in two days, which however would take me at least four to five days before”*. In addition, Laura reported that *“I have achieved some really good results”*, which seemed to be a very pleasant surprise, and have helped Laura build confidence in academic writing. However, she admitted that *“I have no idea if the quality of my assignments is good, I am just trying my best”*. Based on her comments, it appeared that Laura had developed some strategies and techniques that suited herself. For example, she said *“Tutors will help us. However, for me the key thing is that I need to do the thinking myself. I must figure out what I need to write myself”*.

## Social development

### *Getting used to the local culture*

Laura seemed to get more used to the local culture after living in Britain for several months, and commented that *“I notice the cultural differences, but I don’t feel that they are having any major impact on my life”*. For example, she mentioned to me in the previous portrait that she felt surprised that people didn’t use umbrellas in the rain. However, she said that she was doing the same now: *“I don’t use an umbrella anymore”*.

Even so, Laura told me that *"I feel that I will never be fully integrated into the new environment"*. One of the main reasons might be Laura didn't appear to like certain habits of British people. For example, she believed that *"British people are inflexible, and aren't very productive"*. Laura mentioned that once her phone was broken, and she took it to a local shop to repair, and was told that *"the phone needs to be sent to a nearby city to repair"*. However, Laura said *"it took almost a month before I heard from the shop"*. She was told that *"we were unable to fix the phone as it was bought in China, and had a different type of identity code"*. Laura commented that she wasn't happy with the service, because *"if this was the case, why couldn't they tell me earlier? I would have received a reply within a day if this happened in China. I don't think the shop needed a month to figure this out"*.

In addition, Laura considered life in Britain wasn't as interesting as home. She told me that *"I went out a lot in the evening with my friends when I was at home. Since I arrived in Britain, I spent most of my time inside, I hardly go out"*. The main reason, as she explained, could be that *"I often feel so tired in the evening because I have so much to do in the daytime, and had to work very hard. When I get back in the evening, I just want to go to bed"*. Besides, Laura said, *"there isn't much to do here in Britain, apart from going to a pub. However, I wasn't interested in pubs even when I was at home in China"*.

### *Social communications with non-Chinese*

Laura reported that she hardly had any communications with non-Chinese students, in particular, home students. She told me that *"I wanted to know them, but don't have a strong desire to do so"*. Besides, she added, *"I don't know why, but I just know we can't become really close friends"*. In the first semester, Laura said she didn't join any club or society on campus, as *"I was working on my assignments constantly"*. Nevertheless, it appeared that Laura still had plenty of opportunities to get to know British students, as she told me that she was enrolled on a Tourism module, which only had two students: she and a British student. To my surprise, Laura told me that *"I don't know him at all. We only spoke with the tutor, but not with each other"*. On the one hand, Laura believed this might be because of her own personality, as *"I am a very shy person"*. She said, *"my mum told me off because of it, but I can't help it"*. On the other hand, the British student seemed to have similar personalities, as Laura commented *"the British guy was very quiet, it was hard to find the opportunity to talk to him"*. As a consequence, Laura told me

that *“I didn’t really like the arrangement of this module, and would have preferred to have more Chinese classmates”*.

However, Laura told me that the situation she was in wasn’t uncommon among Chinese top-up students. For example, she mentioned that she shared another module with some home students. In the classroom, Laura said, *“all Chinese students were sitting together, and the British students were sitting together. Both sides didn’t speak to each other at all”*.

## Conclusion

This was the second portrait I wrote for Laura, which described her personal experience in the first semester in the areas such as languages, academic and social development. Through the moving through interview, I identified the following areas that I needed to explore further in the moving out interview.

Firstly, how did she get on with non-Chinese classmates in the second semester? Was there any improvement? This was because Laura mentioned that she hardly had any social interactions with the home students, in spite of the fact that she had many opportunities to do so in the first semester.

Secondly, how should the institution and tutors help Chinese top-up students understand and improve their critical thinking and writing skills? Laura mentioned that one of the main difficulties she faced was in relation to critical thinking, which she considered very important for assignment writing in the UK institution. Laura felt that her tutors didn’t explain the meaning very well, and didn’t help her improve the skills in this area.

Thirdly, was she still feeling highly motivated to study in the second semester? And how did she feel about her academic performance? This was because Laura reported that she was more determined to achieve a 2.1 degree since she achieved some good results in the first semester, and came to like the subject area she was studying. In addition, she seemed to get better at writing her academic assignments, since she developed some strategies and techniques that seemed to suit herself.

And finally, did she experience any additional difficulties and challenges in the second semester? Laura reported that she encountered many issues academically and socially in the first semester, such as academic writing, social interactions with the home students, and subsequently experienced the crisis stage. At the moving out stage, Laura

would have been studying in the UK institution for nearly a year, it is therefore important to explore whether her academic and social situation had been improved. And if not, what were the main reasons?

## Laura's moving out portrait

This is Laura's moving out portrait, the final portrait I produced for her. It was developed from the transcript of her moving out interview, which took place in early May 2016. At the time, the second semester had come to an end. Laura told me that all classes had already finished, and she was in the process of completing her semester two assessments.

### About the moving out interview

This final interview was focused on exploring her academic and social development in the second half of the top-up programme, and took place in the morning at 9.30 am, since Laura said that she wanted to come in early to work on her assignments. As with the previous two interviews, this interview was conducted in Chinese. I booked a small seminar room, and Laura arrived on time. She appeared to look energetic. When I commented on her appearance, she giggled and replied "*I don't feel energetic. I am super busy with my coursework*". After having the first two interviews with me already, Laura seemed to be even more relaxed, and commented, "*it is nice to have a chat with you. I prefer this way, because I feel it is easy to have conversations [with you]*".

Because she was at the end of this one-year journey, I asked questions specifically regarding her feelings and thoughts about this one-year experience. Laura told me that "*my mum has asked me the similar question. She wants to know, in my opinion, whether this study abroad trip is worth the money*". And Laura continued saying that "*I am not entirely sure whether it is worth the money, as it is different from what I had expected, but I think it has been a valuable experience. I know that I didn't manage to improve my language skills very much, but at least I am not feeling so scared as I was in China in terms of opening my mouth [to speak English]. Besides, I get to see what living in Britain is like*".

### Feedback about her moving through portrait

As with the moving through interview, I emailed Laura a copy of her moving through portrait, the interview transcript, and the moving out interview questions in advance. Laura said she read them all and told me that "*the portrait is good. I am surprised that you could actually represent my thoughts and feelings at the time so clearly and accurately. If you ask me now, I don't think I would remember how I felt then. But the*

*portrait really helped me remember things*". Laura commented particularly on the description of her transition experience, as she felt that *"it is spot on"*. In addition, Laura said by reading her moving in and moving through portraits, she felt that she had the opportunity to *"have a think and reflect on what I did since the start of the top-up programme"*. For these reasons, Laura told me that *"I am thinking of showing the portraits to my parents, so they get to know my life and experience in Britain"*.

## Her perceptions at the moving out stage

Compared with the moving through stage, Laura's perceptions seemed to have changed again. Through her experience in this year, Laura told me that she came to value the top-up programme and the learning experience in the UK institution, as she felt that she developed the knowledge and expertise that she might need for her future career. This in turn would put her in a more advantaged position in the competitive job market in China: *"some people may say that it isn't worth studying this one-year programme, because it is expensive. Instead, we should all look for a job and start earning money. However, through this study abroad journey, I gradually realize that it is crucial for one to gain a good degree. In order to be successful in the future, one can only rely on oneself, but not anybody else. To me, a good degree is a good investment"*.

In addition, Laura seemed to have set a higher goal for herself in this semester. She told me that *"when I first arrived, I wasn't feeling very confident in myself. I wanted to get a 2.1, but deep in my heart, I would be really happy with a 2.2 degree. But now I definitely want to achieve a 2.1 degree"*. The change of perceptions appeared to be the result of the following reasons. As described below, first, Laura reported that she was enjoying the subject. And second, in spite of the difficulties and challenges she experienced, Laura seemed to have developed some academic writing skills and techniques, which helped her achieve some unexpectedly good results. Consequently, in the second semester, Laura appeared to put the main effort on her studies, since she said, *"my average result of last semester was 59, which isn't far from my goal (60)"*. Laura mentioned that she was motivated to study harder also because she was interested in studying a master's degree in Britain, but would only do so *"if I achieve a 2.1 degree"*.

However, as with the previous semester, there didn't seem to be much improvement in her social development. Laura appeared to have accepted the isolated social situation she was in, and didn't make much effort in getting to know non-Chinese students, in



particular, home students. The related details are provided in the section below (social development).

### Her transition experience at the moving out stage

Laura believed that her transition experience at the moving out stage only followed the U curve model partially. For example, Laura seemed to have moved from the crisis to the recovery stage at the beginning of the second semester. For example, she said, *“I am feeling better than the first semester, and don’t worry about things as much as I did. Even though I may experience similar problems and difficulties again, I don’t think I will feel so stressed any more. This is because I have been there and know what to do now”*. In addition, Laura remarked that she became better at coping with academic related challenges and pressure, and more importantly, Laura believed she *“becomes more confident in writing assignments”*.

However, Laura didn’t seem to have fully managed her academic situation and achieve the goal she set for herself in the second semester. For instance, Laura didn’t appear to fully understand the British education system, such as the meaning and purpose of British degree classification, as she asked me specifically in the interview: *“apart from using it to apply for a master’s degree in a better university, why do people want to get a 2.1?”* Laura also told me that the reason she didn’t know the information was that *“the agents from this UK institution didn’t tell us anything [in relation to degree classification] when they came to deliver the talk to us”*. In the aspect of social development, Laura didn’t appear to have managed to integrate into any local communities, and fully understand the local culture. This was because she said she only socialized with Chinese students, and didn’t make any new non-Chinese friends.

### The development of her language skills

Laura seemed to think that her overall language skills hadn’t improved much in the second semester, and told me that *“I am feeling regretful about it”*. As mentioned below, Laura believed this was mainly because she didn’t have any British friends whom she can practice her English with. In addition, Laura believed that *“it is very difficult for anyone to enhance their English skills significantly in a year anyway. In order to do so, one needs to live [in an English-speaking country] for at least two to three years”*.

Among all four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), Laura considered that her listening skills were getting better than the previous semester. For example, she said, *“if I*

*give 100 percent of my focus in class, I can understand 80 percent of the content. However, in the first semester, I was struggling to keep up with the tutor, especially at the start of the top-up programme". Her speaking skills, in contrast, as she believed, were probably the weakest: "I am unable to speak fluently and have a proper conversation in English. I am still feeling nervous [when talking to British people] and have to take time to think carefully before speaking". Her comments suggest the main reason was that Laura didn't seem to speak much in English: "I have to speak English when I am shopping, it is unavoidable. But otherwise I speak in Chinese most of the time".*

## Academic experience

### *About her exam*

Laura reported that *"the only new challenge I'm experiencing in this semester is my exam, because I didn't have any in the previous semester"*. When the interview took place, Laura said she hadn't had her exam yet. But in her opinion, *"British exams and Chinese exams are quite different, for example, the exams here are all essay based. We will be given a case study to read, then analyse the case study and answer the questions. [The difficulty] is that I have to figure out the answers during the exam, but I don't know how to use the theories to analyse"*. Whilst she was in her home institution in China, Laura recalled the exams were comprised of mainly short answer questions.

In addition, Laura felt that in the UK institution, she needed to put in more time and effort for exam preparation than when she was in her home institution in China. She told me that *"we hardly failed exams at home. This was because the exam questions and answers were normally provided to us in advance to memorize. I have a good memory and tend to recite these answers very quickly. As a result, I often achieved high marks, sometimes even 100% for exams"*. However, in Britain, Laura said that the revision was very different, as *"we have to go through the lecture content, think about the possible questions and find answers ourselves. However, we don't know whether the answers we prepared are correct"*. Therefore, she felt that *"it is much harder to gain a good result"*.

### *Assignment writing*

Through the writing experience she had in the first semester, Laura seemed to have become more confident in academic writing, and commented, *"I am no longer feeling so panicked or depressed when dealing with the assignments"*. In the second semester, Laura appeared to be getting better at managing her learning activities, which seemed to

have helped her gain a better understanding of the knowledge needed for her assignments. For example, Laura said, *“it is quite important to develop one’s self-independence [when living and studying in Britain]. You need to have your own ideas about what you want to do and to achieve.... When the assessment season started, time became very tight.....It is very hard for me to remember all knowledge and information [covered in all classes]. What I normally do is that I write them down on a computer after each class, so that I won’t forget them, and can also go through them later”*.

In addition, Laura said, *“since I came to realise that it is highly important to understand our tutors’ expectations, I am getting much better at asking for their help for my assignments, and have shown my draft to them several times”*. Even so, Laura noted that she was still struggling with meeting deadlines, because *“they were all very close to each other”*. She said she tried to *“allocate time effectively to each individual assignment”*, however, *“I don’t normally manage to do so”*. This was because, as Laura explained, *“I notice that I only become motivated [to write] when the deadline is approaching”*.

The other area Laura seemed to have difficulty with was critical thinking. For example, she said, *“to be honest, I have no idea whether I understand this term. [For example], until now I still don’t know how to write or add more analysis [to my assignments], and why it is important. [Through my experience], I think critical thinking is such a broad area, one may need a much longer time to get to understand it properly”*. In her opinion, her lack of skills in this area was partially because *“Chinese students didn’t come across this term, and didn’t really write assignment this way”*. In addition, Laura believed that it was because Chinese students weren’t supported properly in this area. For example, she told me, *“I tried to ask my tutor for help, but she didn’t really tell me how I can improve, instead, she just pointed me to go through the lectures and resources on the module site [on the VLE]”*.

## Social development

Towards the end of the moving out stage, Laura had already lived in the UK for nearly a year, and felt that *“I am used to living in Britain now”*. However, Laura reported that she still didn’t manage to extend her social circle with any British students. As with the previous semester, she said she was surrounded by British students in class: *“including myself, there are only three Chinese students studying Tourism, and I am the only one on the top-up route”*. Based on her comments, there seemed to be issues on both sides - herself, and the institution. For instance, language barriers seemed to be a main issue

preventing her from making new local friends, as she told me that *“I found it hard to carry on any conversation in English, and would be feeling very embarrassed if I couldn’t say things right”*.

In addition, Laura admitted that she was a shy person, and was reluctant to take the first step: *“I prefer the other side to take the initiative. I am happy to have conversations if a British student comes forward to speaking with me”*. She then provided me with an example: *“I travelled around Europe with my friends during the Easter holiday. The tour guide was very chatty, and kept talking to us. I managed to have a good chat with him, because he started the conversation”*.

On the other hand, Laura believed that the UK institution didn’t provide sufficient support to help international students in relation to their social development. She said, *“I feel the institution doesn’t consider and look after international students well, in particular in the aspect of social activities”*. Her opinion seemed to be based on the comparison of the activities she experienced in the UK institution and her friends’ experience in a different UK institution (University of X). As she commented, even though *“the Student Union has organized some activities for international students, such as playing table tennis, and having dinner together, but they aren’t that interesting”*. In contrast, Laura told me that she found out through her friends that the University of X *“has had many interesting parties for international students. Each party was themed specifically around a particular nationality or culture. They sound so much more fun”*. In addition, Laura felt that *“the institution should organise more trips for all students”*, because *“this is the best way for helping people get to know each other”*.

### Her future plans after the top-up programme

As mentioned above, Laura said whether she would study a master’s degree was dependent on her degree results. She aimed at a 2.1 degree because, as she explained, *“I would have to take another IELTS test and try to get a score of 6.5 if I get a 2.2 degree”*. Laura told me that as she believed that her language skills were poor, she wasn’t interested in going down this route.

Even though she hadn’t yet made the final decision, Laura said she had already started her preparation for a master’s degree. For instance, she mentioned she was asking for advice of a friend who was doing a master’s degree at present, also a couple of Chinese postgraduate students she met when she was travelling in Europe. Her comments

indicate that she was having the following worries. Her main concern seemed to be the academic pressure. She said, “*the master’s study sounds more demanding than the top-up programme. Besides, a year goes too fast, and I’m not sure whether I can cope with the pressure*”. In addition, Laura seemed to worry about being on her own in the future. She told me that she had already applied for a few UK institutions, however, “*none of my friends applied for them*”. If this was the case, Laura remarked she had to make sure to make new Chinese friends, and hope “*the situation won’t be too bad*”. Furthermore, getting to know British students still appeared to be a main challenge for Laura. She mentioned a friend told her that “*I probably would come across more home students on a master’s degree*”. Because she said she was a very shy person, Laura seemed to be concerned with communicating with home students, even though she told me she planned to try again in future.

### Her European trip in her Easter holiday

Laura told me that she “*travelled to France, Italy and Switzerland*” in the Easter holiday with four friends for ten days. They didn’t travel by themselves, but joined a tourist group. This group, Laura said, “*was comprised of about 20 Chinese students studying in different UK institutions*”. Through this travelling experience, Laura reported that these European countries “*are completely different from what I had in mind*”. For example, she felt that France and Italy “*can’t compare with Britain*”, since “*the buildings weren’t as beautiful as those I have seen in Britain, and the shops were full of Asian customers*”. Laura seemed to be particularly disappointed at Paris, because “*the city was neither beautiful, nor romantic*”. In addition, she said, “*it lacked cultural heritage*”. In contrast, Laura commented that she “*had a very good feeling and impression about Switzerland*”, as “*the country feels similar to the UK*”. For instance, “*the scenery was beautiful, and people seem to be nice and well educated*”. In fact, she mentioned that one of the friends was so attracted to Switzerland, and “*is considering doing a master’s degree in that country*”.

### Final summary

During the time she was studying her top-up programme in the UK institution (2015-2016), I interviewed Laura three times, and subsequently produced three portraits for her, based on the interview transcripts. The purpose of the portraits was to represent her personal experience throughout the year at the moving in, moving through and moving out stages. Laura was offered the opportunity to read and provide her comments and

feedback on each individual portrait, as it was emailed to her in advance before the next interview took place. Laura reported that she believed the portraits truly reflected her thoughts and feelings at the time, and she was happy with the content. As a result, little change was made to her portraits.

### *The change of her perceptions in this year*

Reading through all three portraits, it appeared that Laura's perceptions in relation to her academic development had changed while she went through the three key transition stages, however, her perceptions in relation to her social development had remained largely the same. For example, Laura reported that she had a very positive first impression of the country and host city, and was excited and enjoying the new life in Britain. Laura said she was looking forward to her studies in the UK institution, but didn't seem to have much knowledge and information about the British education system, or have made sufficient preparations for her top-up programme. Laura also mentioned that she was hoping to get to know some British students.

However, her perceptions had changed when she moved onto the moving through stage. Academically Laura reported that she came to realise that studying in the UK institution was much harder than what she had anticipated. She said that she started encountering many difficulties and challenges, and found it hard to cope with the academic pressure and intensity. One of the main challenges seemed to be related to academic writing. This was largely because Laura said she had no experience in this area while she was in her home institution in China. As a result, Laura said she wondered whether coming to Britain to study this programme was the correct decision. During the first semester, Laura felt that it was very challenging to make new friends with British students, and didn't manage to do so, even though she reported she had many opportunities.

At the moving out stage, Laura reported that she was motivated and much more determined to achieve a 2.1 degree, since she developed an interest in the subject she was studying and gained some unexpected good results in the first semester. In addition, she came to value the top-up programme and believed that she had learnt some useful knowledge which might help her get a good job in future. As a consequence, Laura appeared to have devoted more effort to her studies. In contrast, as with the previous semester, Laura didn't seem to have made much effort towards her social development, even though she said she was interested in making local friends. In this respect, Laura didn't manage to successfully integrate into the local society.

## The contribution of participating in this research to her personal development

Based on Laura's comments, it appeared that taking part in my research, and being able to read her portraits provided a good opportunity for Laura to think and reflect on her personal experience and development at the key transition stages in this year. This potentially assisted her to develop and sustain better during her studies in this UK institution. For example, Laura commented, "*for me it is great that I can read the portraits as you have helped me record my development throughout this year in detail*". This is because "*normally nobody can remember what he or she did or said before, and hence doesn't really have the opportunity to self-reflect*". Through reading the portraits, Laura said, "*I can remember and review what had happened when I first arrived in Britain, during the first semester and the seminar semester*". As a consequence, she reported, "*I can track the process of my development and think deeply about my experience in this year*". For instance, she remarked continuously "*I came to realise [after reading my portraits] that if one works hard, one gets the reward*".

## Appendix 2 Participant information sheet (the trust document)

### **Title of the study**

Perceptions of Chinese top up students transitioning through a regional UK university, implications for programme design

### **The purpose of this document**

This document intends to provide essential information regarding the research purpose of this doctoral study; how the data will be collected from you; your rights as a research participant and how your personal data will be used and protected during and after the research.

You will be provided with a copy of this document with my signature on.

### **The purpose of the research**

This research aims at developing a good understanding of the Chinese top-up students' personal experiences during their studies of a one-year top-up programme in a regional U.K institution. Fifteen participants are chosen for this research. All of them came to the UK institution via partnership agreements between their home institutions in China and the UK institution. Before coming to the UK, they studied either an HND or an equivalent three-year international programme in their home institutions.

A summary of the research findings will be sent to you upon the completion of this research study.

### **Participation and withdrawal from the research**

This is a doctoral research study undertaken as part of requirements of my PhD. In this sense, I am not representing or in a collaboration with the UK institution. The data gathered from you will not be used to monitor your performance; neither will it have any impact on your study, nor on your academic results.



Choosing to take part in this research is entirely your choice. You are free to stop participating in this research at any time as you wish, without giving any explanations. There are no consequences as a result of it.

### **Data collection method**

You will be participating in one-to-one interviews with me three times through this academic year (2015-16). During these interviews, we will have informal conversations about your personal experiences in the UK institution while you are studying your top-up programme. This first interview will be conducted in summer 2015; the second interview will be conducted at the end of the first semester in early 2016; and the final interview will take place at the end of the second semester at around May 2016.

- Each interview will take between one and one and a half hours.
- Each interview will be audio recorded upon gaining your permission (this is solely for the purpose of data transcription and analysis).
- All interview questions will be sent to you in advance.
- We can negotiate the interview date, time and location together.

### **Data privacy and anonymity**

- All interviews will be transcribed solely by myself.
- All portraits will be anonymized (e.g., you will not be identified and recognised by the reader via the portraits).
- The data collected (e.g., the interview transcripts) from you will be kept secret (e.g., the electronic files will be password protected), to which only myself has the access.
- Your personal data will not be shared with the Institution or any other third parties.
- Your interview transcript and the portrait (e.g., a written document developed upon your transcript) at each stage will be sent to you for comments and feedback upon completion.
- You have the right to delete or change any content of the portrait prior to publication.
- The data gathered from this research will be used for academic research purposes only. If published (e.g., conference proceedings, presentations, and

academic papers), all details that may identify the participants will be removed from the data (e.g., name, gender, university).

- You can choose a pseudonym (e.g., a fake name) to represent you in your portraits and other publications.

### **Research findings**

- A summarized research findings will be sent to you upon the completion of this doctoral study.
- Whenever there is a publication resulting from using your data, a draft will be send to you in advance.

### **Further information and contact details**

If you have any other questions, concerns, and/or would like to find out more information about this research, please feel free to contact me directly:

Name: Xianghan O'Dea

Email:

Phone:

**Signature of the researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

参与研究对象资料信息单 (the Chinese version of the participant information sheet)

## 论文题目

在英国攻读衔接学士学位的中国学生在过渡到英国大学学习过程中的感想和体会：对衔接学士学位的意见和建议

## 信息单的目的

本文件的主要目的是提供以下基础信息：1) 本篇博士论文的研究目的；2) 数据是如何从你（作为研究对象）收集的；3) 作为研究对象所赋予的权利；4) 关于本研究在数据收集过程中和收集后如何保护你的个人信息隐私权。

作为本课题的唯一研究员，我会在这份文件签名并留给你保留存档。

## 本篇博士论文研究目的

这个课题旨在深入了解在英国攻读衔接学士学位的中国学生在过渡到英国大学学习过程中的感想，体会和经验。也就是说，在过渡的过程中，中国学生是如何应对所遇到的困难和挑战。本研究一共挑选十五名研究对象。所有的研究对象都是通过在国内的大学和这所英国大学之间建立的合作关系来英国留学的。在国内大学读书的时候，所有的研究对象或是攻读英国高等教育文凭，或是等同的三年制国际项目。

本研究结束后，关于研究成果摘要的报告会与所有参与研究的研究对象共享。

## 参与研究和退出研究

研究并完成本课题是我攻读博士学位的必要条件。我必须重申的是，本研究课题和这所英国大学没有任何关联，也就是说，我不代表这所大学，这个课题也不是我和这所英国大学联合研究的。

选择参与或不参与本项研究完全是自愿性质。即使已经参与，你可以选择在研究的任何阶段退出而不需要提供任何解释。无论你的决定是什么，都不会对你的利益产生任何影响，

比如说，这个研究不是用来监督和监测你在这所大学的表现，也不会对你在这所大学学习，特别是学习成绩和生活造成任何影响。

## **数据收集方法**

在你攻读衔接学士学位的这一年（2015 到 2016 学年）中，我一共会采访你三次。第一次采访在 2015 年夏季，第二次在 2015 年十二月份左右（第一学期结束前），第三次在 2016 年五月左右（第二学期结束前）。

- 每次访谈大概一到一个半小时左右
- 只有在你同意的基础上，我会对访谈进行录音，这主要是方便我进行数据记录和分析。访谈的录音会被秘密保存起来，比如说，所有录音会保存在我私人电脑里，存档的文件夹会做加密，而且只有我本人可以接触到该文档。
- 我会事先提供访谈所问的基础问题。
- 我们可以共同商讨和决定访问日期，时间和地点。

## **数据保密和个人信息私密权**

- 所有研究参与者的访谈记录都由我自己录制抄写。
- 所有画像都是匿名的，也就是说，读者是不会从发表的画像中认出你的。
- 收集到的全部数据都会被秘密保存起来，所有录音会保存在我私人电脑里，存档的文件夹会做加密，而且只有我本人可以接触到该文档。
- 我不会与任何第三方，包括这所英国大学，共享的你的个人数据以及资料。
- 画像完成之后，你会获得访谈记录以及画像的副本，你的合理的建议和意见会被采纳并用于完成和加强最终版本。
- 在研究结果发表之前，你可以删除或者修改画像中的任何内容。
- 本论文以及研究成果只用做教科研用途，不做他用。如果发表研究成果，你的个人信息会被保护起来，例如你的姓名，性别和所在院校都会被屏蔽，通常是通过应用假名的方式。
- 你可以为自己的画像挑选一个替代姓名。

## **关于研究结果**

- 本研究结束后，关于研究成果摘要的报告会与所有参与研究的研究对象共享。
- 如果引用了你的画像的研究成果在科研期刊发表，草稿会事先与你共享。

## **索要进一步资料以及我的联系方式**

如果你有其他问题，或者担心和顾虑，请直接联系我本人：

姓名: Xi anghan O Dea

邮件:

电话:

研究者签名: \_\_\_\_\_

日期: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 3 Explanations for the moving in questions

### **Now you have arrived in the UK for over a week, how do you feel?**

This is an icebreaker question, and is designed to gain some initial impressions of the participants on many different aspects, for example, the city, the institution, the weather and the food. The intention is to encourage the participants to open up and lead the conversations forward.

### **What things are you pleased about? And what things are you disappointed about (e.g., the city, the country, the institution, the pre-session course, and others)?**

As with the previous question, these two questions are also icebreaker questions, and are designed to explore the participants' first impressions from their study abroad experiences.

### **What are your main worries at present? And how are you going to manage them?**

A similar question will be asked in the next two interviews. As the participants are at the initial stage of their transition, their current worries may be very different from those in the future. The comparison between the answers crossing all three stages will help the researcher understand the participants' academic and social experiences through the year, and the contexts that may contribute to the change.

### **What are the main challenges you are facing now?**

As with the previous questions, a similar question will be asked in the following two interviews. The purposes are to explore: 1) both the academic and social challenges the participants are facing at the start of this study-abroad journey; 2) how they deal with them at this stage; and 3) the contexts that are related to these challenges.

### **What are your expectations of this one-year top-up programme?**

This question explores the pre-arrival expectations of the participants on their top-up programme, the city and the institution. But more importantly, this question intends to examine the external forces that contributed to and influenced their views. As suggested in the literature, little research has been conducted on the pre-arrival expectations of international students, which however seems to have a direct impact on the adjustment

process of these students during their transition. This, as a result, will affect the future recruitment and retention of international students. Additionally, the comments collected at this stage will be compared with the participants' actual experiences in the moving through and moving out stages.

**Are there any major differences between the reality and your expectations?**

This is a follow up question. Although these students have not yet started their top-up programmes, they had an initial contact with the academic and living environment in the UK, since they had already arrived in the country for a week and started their pre-sessional language course. In this respect, they may have already noticed some differences between the reality and their expectations. The answer to the question may be helpful in understanding the challenges, worries the participants are currently experiencing.

**What prompted you to study a top-up programme in this UK institution?**

As discussed in chapter two, China's study-abroad market continues to boom, and the top-up route has gradually become a popular option. Therefore, this question aims to explore the motivations of the participants in this research (the push and pull factors).

**How much did you know about the top-up programme and the UK institution before leaving China? Have you conducted any research beforehand?**

Both questions aim at firstly exploring the participants' level of knowledge and understanding of their top-up programmes before departure, and secondly their channels of information, for instance, was it collected via "word of mouth" or their personal research. The answers may also help understand the motivations of the participants for studying abroad, and their pre-departure expectations.

**Can you describe your feelings towards your experience in your Chinese university?**

Almost all Chinese top-up students coming to this UK institution have studied an HND or an equivalent three-year international programme in China. This question intends to explore the participants' thoughts and opinions (e.g., were they satisfied or disappointed at the experience? what did they learn and what did they achieve?) about the programme, and their experiences. A follow up question *whether and how your Chinese*

*university experience helped you adapt to the UK academic environment* will be asked in the next interview, the answers will help the researcher investigate and understand whether this three-year programme laid a good foundation for their study of the top-up programmes in this UK institution.

**Do you have any plans for your studies in this UK institution?**

This question is interlinked with several other questions, such as their pre-departure expectations, English skills and their pre-departure knowledge about the institution and their top-up programmes. The UK higher education system is very different from the Chinese one. Whether the participants take the initiative in this aspect may either contribute or hinder their academic and social development in this year. In addition, this question helps explore the help and support provided by this UK institution.

**Do you have plans for the future after you complete the top-up programme?**

This question seeks to explore three areas: 1) whether the participants have plans; 2) if so, what are they? And most importantly 3) how have these plans been developed? In this sense, the key emphasis of this question is on gaining some basic understandings of the factors that influence their decision-making.

This question is amended (please see the section 6.4.2) after the pilot study, in order to ensure that the participants are not restricted to the stereotypes reported in current literature (e.g., go back to China, or study a postgraduate degree).

**What is your English level (e.g., listening, speaking, reading and writing)?**

This question is to explore the views of the participants in relation to their language skills on all four aspects (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The answer will help gain some understandings of the participants' pre-departure development, and also how it impacts on their language development, and academic and social development through the year.

**Do you understand the concept of the U curve model? Do you think your current personal experience is following this U shaped pattern?**

As discussed in chapter four, the U curve model was one of the main theoretical foundations adopted in this research. This question intends to explore the initial feelings



and views of the participants, since they have just arrived in the UK. The comments of the participants will help the researcher understand whether and how their transition at the moving in stage has followed the U curve model.

## Appendix 4 Explanations for the moving through questions

### **Now you are halfway through the top-up programme, how do you feel?**

By the time when the second interview is conducted, the first semester has just finished. This is also an icebreaker question. The comments of the participants will be used to compare with those gained in the moving in interviews. This consequently will help the researcher understand whether the feelings and the perceptions of the participants have changed and how the changes are related to the participants' academic and social development during the first half of this one-year study abroad journey.

### **Are your expectations met? Can you give me examples of things that are very different from what you had imagined?**

This question is built up on the previous one, and echoes the question "*what are your expectations*" asked in the previous interview. The participants, by now, should have a much clearer idea about their top-up programme and the UK life. The answer hopefully will provide a much deeper understanding of the differences between their expectations and the actual experiences. Additionally, this question aims to explore how the perceptions of the participants may have changed during this one-year period.

### **What experiences so far in Britain have had the most impact on you and why?**

As with the first question, this is also an icebreaker question. As the participants should have already read their moving in portrait before attending the moving through interviews, the researcher wants to provide the opportunity for the participants to look back and reflect on their experiences.

### **What do you find the most satisfying and/or disappointing so far in this semester?**

This question intends to gain an overview of the participants' experiences during the first semester one, rather than to focus on the negative side only. Some directions (about the institution, their top-up programme and the staff) may be provided if the participants need to be probed for answers.

**Compared with the teaching approaches in China, what things are the same? And what things are different?**

In their first semester, the participants had a proper contact with the British teaching approach. It is interesting and important for the researcher to explore the views and thoughts of the participants in relation to the Chinese and British higher education systems. In addition, this question explores how the differences and/or similarities between the two education systems affect the academic development of the participants.

**What do you do in your spare time in this institution?**

This question seeks to gain knowledge and understandings of the participants' social development in this UK institution. The answer may also help understand the interpersonal relationships between the participants and others, in particular, with non-Chinese students.

**Do you have any difficulties dealing with non-Chinese students, both inside and outside the classroom? (if so, what are they? if not, describe how you are dealing with them)**

As discussed in chapter three, Chinese top-up students appear to experience more challenges and difficulties than other international students, due to the nature of their top-up programmes (the duration of a top-up programme is a year). In addition, one of the major challenges identified in current literature in relation to Chinese international students is social adjustment, as these students don't tend to socialize with non-Chinese students when they study abroad.

This question therefore explores mainly the attitude of the participants towards the interrelationships with non-Chinese people, the situation they are in, and the reasons behind it.

**Would you still come to this institution if you were given an opportunity to choose again?**

This question is related closely to the question "are your expectations met"? The answer may provide the researcher with a different angle to explore and understand the issues and challenges that the participants are experiencing at this stage, and/or their

achievements or triumphs. This, as a result, will help understand their academic and social development of the participants.

**When facing difficulties and problems, how and what do you do to cope with them?**

As mentioned above, Chinese top-up students often encounter more difficulties and issues than other international students as they only have a short period of time to adjust to the new environment. In addition, since they are far away from home, the participants have to deal with the issues themselves willingly or unwillingly. This question therefore explores whether the participants have developed any coping strategies in relation to both the academic and social challenges they are facing.

**What has been your most interesting/enjoyable experience so far?**

Due to the nature of their top-up programme, there may be many ups and downs through this one-year journey. Apart from the challenges, worries and difficulties, there may be also some achievements and happy memories. The intention of this question is to explore the positive side of the individual experiences.

**Whether and how your Chinese university experience has helped you adapt to the academic environment in the UK?**

This question is built on the question “*can you describe your feelings towards your Chinese university experience?*” in the previous interview, and aims at gaining an insight view of the participants on the contributions of the programme they studied in their home institution in China to the top up programme.

**What are the main challenges you are facing at present in relation to your academic and social development?**

This research set out to gain an understanding of the perceptions of a group of Chinese top-up students while they are transitioning through this UK institution. In order to understand whether and how their perceptions change, it is important to know the difficulties and challenges the participants face at each key transition stage.

### **What are your main worries?**

The same question was asked in the moving in interviews, but the emphasis was very different. For example, at the moving in stage, the Chinese top-up students had not yet started their top-up programmes. Some of the worries they had at the time might be solved already, but others may remain during the first semester. This question therefore seeks to explore: 1) whether there are any changes, and 2) if so, whether and how are the participants managing them.

### **What are your main achievements in this semester?**

This question offers an opportunity for the participants to talk and reflect on things that matter to them. The answer to this question will also enable the researcher to change the order of the questions to accommodate their individual circumstances.

### **Looking back at your experience in the first semester, do you think your transition experience at this stage has followed this U shaped pattern?**

A similar question was asked in the moving in interviews already. As with the previous interview, this questions seeks to explore whether and how the transition of the participants follows the U shaped curve at the moving through stage, and the related reasons and contexts.

### **Why are you interested in studying a master's degree after completing the top-up programme? And what is your current situation relating to the master's application procedure?**

As the majority of participants mentioned in the moving in interviews that they were intending to study a master's degree after they finish this top-up programme, these two questions are designed to explore their plans in this area in more detail. The answers will help the researcher understand whether and how this plan is interlinked to the top up route they chose, and also their current academic and social development in this year.

### **Do you understand British undergraduate degree classification?**

The comments of the participants indicated that they didn't appear to have made sufficient preparations for their top up programme and the new education system prior to their departure. However, most of them seemed to have set a high expectation for themselves, that is, to achieve a 2.1 degree. In addition, many of them appeared to feel

that it was going to be fairly easy to get a 2.1 degree. Therefore, this question is designed to examine the knowledge and understandings of the participants in relation to British undergraduate classification, and how is it related to their academic development in the first semester.

**You mentioned in the previous interview that you made little preparation for the forthcoming top-up programme, or didn't know how and where to find the related information. Does it have any impact on your current study?**

As mentioned above, there seemed to be a lack of sufficient preparations at the personal and institutional levels before the participants set off on their journey. Therefore, it is important to explore and gain an understanding of its impact on their academic development in the first semester.

## Appendix 5 Explanations for the moving out questions

### **Now you have almost completed your top-up programme, is your overall experience in this UK institution positive or disappointing?**

This is an icebreaker question in the final interviews. It intends to encourage the participants to open up and express freely on the personal experiences all the way through this one-year study abroad period. The participants are not restricted to any particular aspect, but are given the opportunity to lead the conversations to the directions they are interested in.

The answer will be compared with those collected from the previous interviews (e.g., *now you have arrived in the UK for over a week, how do you feel?* and *you are halfway through the top-up programme, how do you feel?*). Probing questions will be asked specifically if there are any major differences.

### **What are the important things you have learnt from this study abroad experience?**

The top-up programmes are nearly finished when the third interviews are conducted. “The important things” may be some positive experiences, disappointments, or both. As with the previous question, this one provides the opportunity for the participants to look back at the journey, to think and reflect on their personal experiences in this year.

Additional questions such as “can you explain it further” or “can you give me some examples” may be asked accordingly based on the answers, in order to probe and encourage the participants to provide more insight views on this topic.

### **What impacts will they (the important things) have on your future development (e.g., personal/further studies/careers)?**

This is a follow-up question. The Chinese top-up students are about to move on and start a new chapter in life. This question seeks to understand how and whether the participants will apply what they have learnt in this year to their future development.

**What are the most memorable experiences and/or lessons you have in this year?  
Can you provide me with three examples?**

This question intends to gain a good overview of their individual experiences, rather than to focus solely on the academic development. In other words, it aims at encouraging the participants to review and reflect on not only the problems and issues they have encountered, but also their positive experiences and achievements.

**What have been the main challenges and difficulties you face during this academic year?**

As mentioned previously, the study and living environment in the UK is very different from their home institutions in China, and hence the participants have encountered some challenges and difficulties in this year.

This question seeks to provide the opportunity for the participants to think deeply and reflect on their over experiences through their top-up programme. Additionally, this question intends to explore if there are any differences compared with the answers collected via the question in the previous interviews (e.g., *what are the main challenges you face now?*).

**How did you deal with them? And have you sorted them out yet?**

This is a follow-up question, and intends to provoke a deeper understanding on the interviewee's coping strategies, and problem solving skills, which may also have an impact on their views towards their overall university experience in the UK.

**What are the benefits/advantages of this top-up programme?**

This question seeks to explore, from a different angle, why and how this study-abroad experience has contributed to the participants' academic and social development, also their views and feelings towards the institution, and their top-up programme.

**What have been your main worries? And how have you managed them?**

The same question was asked at the moving in and moving through stages as well. The main purpose is to explore whether there are any changes through the key transition stages in this year and the reasons for it.



**Did they have any impact on your study and life on campus?**

This is a follow-up question, and aims at probing the participants to think further and provide more details regarding this topic. The answer may also help the researcher understand the difficulties and challenges the participants experienced through this year. Although some worries might be self-solvable, others might have remained and have turned into some real issues later on.

**What are your main achievements in your academic and social development?**

The intention is to gain an in-depth view of the participants on both their academic and social development. The interviewee will be encouraged to express their opinions and thoughts freely under this theme. Additional questions may be asked to probe further in the areas such as the teaching and learning support, language development, independent learning, and social activities.

**What could have been improved to help you settle in and study in this institution better?**

This question intends to help recognize the gap between the expectations of the participants and their actual experiences regarding their academic and development. This, in the hope, will help this UK institution, and potentially other UK institutions providing top-up programmes to understand the expectations and support Chinese top-up students, and other international top-up students truly need when they study top-up programmes in these institutions.

**Looking back your experience in the second semester, do you think your transition experience at this stage has followed this U shaped pattern?**

As with the previous interviews at the moving in and moving through stage, this question is designed to explore the views of the participants in regard to their transition experiences at the moving out stage. The comments of the participants in these three interviews will help the researcher better understand how and to what extent the transition experiences of the participants have followed the U curve model through this one-year study abroad journey.

**How are you getting on with the home and other non-Chinese students in the second semester?**

At the moving through interviews, most participants indicated that they were having difficulties in making new friends with the home students and other non-Chinese students, and almost all of them didn't manage to do so in their first semester. This particular social barrier in relation to international students, such as Chinese students has been identified in current literature. The answer to this question will help the researcher better understand the social development of the participants through this top-up year.

**Why did you find it so hard to write academic assignments in Britain? And how are you coping with it in the second semester?**

These two questions are designed to explore one specific area regarding the academic development of the participants. In the moving in interviews, the majority of participants commented that they were struggling with writing academic assignments. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to understand the reasons behind, and the related contexts. In addition, the answer to this question will help the researcher better understand the development of the participants in relation to their academic writing skills through this one-year journey, and its impact on their overall academic performance and development.

## Appendix 6 Explanations for the impact interview questions

### **Several individualized questions from the individual portraits**

These are warm up questions, and aim to help the participants refresh and bring back to them memories of the previous interviews and portraits, since the last interviews took place almost a year ago. The following is a list of warm up questions I asked Jane in her impact interview. Permission was asked and granted by Jane to use these questions as an example in this audit trail.

- 1) When I interviewed you last time, you mentioned that your dad wanted you to go to Canada to study a master's degree, so that the whole family could potentially relocate to Canada in the future. You said that you had applied to a few UK institutions already, but hadn't yet made any contacts with Canadian universities. So what is your plan now?
- 2) You mentioned that you grew fond of the host city, and felt very reluctant to leave at the end of the study. Now you have left Britain for a year and have had time to think and reflect on your personal experience in Britain, how do you feel about this one-year study abroad experience? And what feeling currently do you have towards the city and the country?
- 3) How were your final degree results? Did they meet your expectations?
- 4) Have you had any plans for your future career? And what are you hoping to gain from your future career?

### **What are your main memories from this top-up year?**

This is an icebreaker question, and aims to create an informal and relaxing atmosphere. This is because, even though the participants took part in the research process already, the previous interviews were conducted a year ago. In this respect, it is essential and necessary to give the participants some time to relax and get familiar with the interview environment again. In addition, by recalling their experiences of last year, the participants are hopefully able to refresh their memory and get ready to answer the questions below.

**You attended the interviews and read the portraits. Did the overall process have any effect on you?**

This question is designed to explore whether there is any effect on the personal experiences of the participants through their participation in the research process in the previous year. In other words, the purpose of this question is to gain a better understanding of the impact of portrait methodology from the participants' perspective.

**Which had the greater impact on you: the interviews, reading the transcripts or portraits?**

This question aims at gaining an in-depth understanding of the individual views on all three parts, and also which part of the process has more impact on their personal experiences while they were taking part in this research.

**As a result of doing this research with me, did it change the way you did things?  
As a result of doing this research with me, did it change the way you felt about things?**

These two questions are designed to explore further on exactly what kinds of effect this data collection process has on the participants. Further questions may be asked based on the responses provided by the participants.