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**Journeys towards Masters' literacies: Chinese students' transitions from undergraduate study in China to postgraduate study in the UK**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

to

The College of Humanities & Social Science  
The University of Edinburgh

2014

## **Abstract**

This research explored Chinese students' experiences of acquiring and practising academic literacies as required in their Master's programmes. To date, academic literacy studies in common with wider research on higher education students' learning have tended to focus on the experiences of undergraduate students, particularly in western universities. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by investigating the learning journeys of students who had gained a first degree in China and were undertaking postgraduate study in the UK.

Data were collected from three-phases of semi-structured interview: at the beginning, at the halfway and the end of the teaching component prior to the Master's dissertation phase. Each of the participants was drawn from one of three contrasting Master's programmes at the University of Edinburgh (Education, Finance and Investment, and Signal Processing and Communications) and participated in all three phases of interview. All eighteen participants' experiences are presented as case studies to bring their voices to the fore and acknowledge the complexity and individuality of their learning journeys.

The research shows that five dimensions of transitions are significant and relevant to all the participants – transitions in language, pedagogical culture, subject, level of study, and living and learning abroad. The language barrier is particularly important both in itself as well as through its influence on other transitions, although all five transitions are in various respects interwoven. The extent to which the transitions are challenging differs across participants and programmes. The perspective of transitions does not therefore suffice to capture the richness of the Masters' students' journeys.

Accordingly, the perspective of Masters' literacies is introduced as a powerful lens through which to explore the Chinese participants' learning experiences and challenges and how these are linked to their confidence in themselves as Master's students. Four academic literacy practices are viewed in this study as key components of Masters' literacies: autonomy in learning, subject discourses, critical

and analytical thinking, and interaction with teachers and students. Finally, the conceptual, methodological and practical implications of these findings are explored.

## **Declaration**

I, Wei Zhao, hereby declare that this thesis was composed by myself and that this is my own work. I furthermore declare that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Wei Zhao

## **Acknowledgements**

From the bottom of my heart, I would like to thank my supervisors: Professor Dai Hounsell and Dr. Pauline Sangster. Both supervisors have been always my personal mentors as well as academic teachers, encouraging and guiding me. Dai has contributed a considerable amount of time and expertise to support and lead me all the way through my PhD journey. He has demonstrated tremendous experience of working with and supervising international students. He has also empathized with my sojourn as an overseas student far away from home – as has Pauline, who has always given me prompt and effective feedback on my work even when her schedule has been at its busiest. She has been caring and supportive both academically and personally, and encouraged me to ‘work smart’ and enjoy life as well. With my supervisors’ support, I have gained a sense of belonging and confidence during my years at The University of Edinburgh.

I would also like to thank my PhD peers and the staff of The Moray House School of Education. They have become my friends as well as my colleagues, who have shown me friendship every day – a friendship that links us and will last. I would also like to express my great appreciation to my lovely friends Li and Douglas. They have understood completely how strongly I have missed home and how hard I have worked every day. They have treated me as a member of their family and made my life cheerful. With them, Edinburgh, this lovely and beautiful city, is indeed my home.

I must also express my unbounded gratitude to my parents for their loving and unstinting support to me throughout my time as a postgraduate student in Scotland.

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## Introduction

### **1.1 Background to This Study**

#### *1.1.1 Study rationale*

The topic of Chinese students' experience of learning in western countries has attracted a significant amount of attention, and there is a large number of small-scale studies which have investigated this important area. However, most of these studies concentrate on the international students' learning experiences at the undergraduate level, rather than at postgraduate level, and there has been little research on international students' learning experiences at Master's level on tightly-condensed one-year Master's programmes in the United Kingdom. Moreover, while previous research has identified language barriers, and unfamiliarity with western pedagogical settings, as particularly important learning challenges encountered by international students, other related but influential factors remain less well-researched, such as subject matter and level of study. These gaps in the research literature informed my decision to investigate whether findings from the existing literature on Chinese undergraduate students' learning experiences were replicated in research which focused on Master's level study, and international Chinese students' experiences of undertaking different Master's degrees in a Western university.

#### *1.1.2 My personal experience and interests*

This topic also stems from my own interest and learning experience as an international Master's student at the University of Edinburgh in the 2006/07 academic session. Having left China for the first time, I found that my one-year Master's learning journey was very challenging for a number of reasons, and I struggled to cope with these challenges. As one of the Chinese students in the programme, I heard quite often from my Chinese peers that they expected our UK

teachers to provide everything from how to motivate themselves to learn effectively to the specific knowledge that was required for particular courses. It was not only my peers who experienced real challenges with coping in the UK context: I also struggled to know how best to learn in an unfamiliar western pedagogical context in general, and in my particular disciplinary context – Education – in particular. This was because learning in a western university was completely different from my earlier undergraduate learning experience at a Chinese university.

These experiences aroused my personal interest and led to my decision to build on a small-scale research project undertaken for my Master's dissertation which investigated how Chinese students experienced their Master's learning. For this research I interviewed four Master's students, each from a different disciplinary programme. Having completed this dissertation, my understanding of Chinese students' learning experiences in a western environment was significantly broadened. At the beginning of the study I had expected the main findings to relate to the significant culture shock experienced by these Master's students, but I found that the picture was considerably more complex and multifaceted than I had anticipated. From the dissertation I found that the subject matter of different disciplinary programmes, and other important aspects of Master's level study in an unfamiliar and challenging context, not only impacted significantly on students' learning experiences in similar ways overall, but that students in different areas also experienced very different challenges and in different ways and to different degrees.

When I embarked on my PhD thesis, although some of the key concepts I was investigating were only well-established within the literature on western undergraduate students' learning, I came to realise that these concepts may be equally important to research on international students' Master's level study, particularly the concept of academic literacy practices. Moreover, as I began to read widely for the thesis, I found that other concepts began to emerge in the literature that might shed some light on international Master's students' learning and my attention therefore shifted to such contexts and to how they might inform the research undertaken for this thesis. In addition, I began to characterise Chinese

Master's students' learning as 'learning journeys', and to explore these journeys as learning challenges from a more integrated perspective, and I have emphasised their experiences of acquiring and practising academic literacies. My understanding of existing concepts, and of how they are defined and discussed in current writing and research, and how I then developed them to arrive to the completely new concept – Masters' Literacies – are explored in more detail in the **Literature Review** chapter.

## **1.2 Summary of the Study**

The present thesis reports on a longitudinal and exploratory investigation which examined the learning experiences of groups of Chinese students on one-year Master's programmes in three contrasting disciplinary programmes in an UK university. More specifically, it focuses on the perspective of these students – their perceptions of their experiences of acquiring and practising the literacies which are required for successful learning at the Master's-level learning. In addition, there is a focus on what would be the particular learning challenges that these students would encounter during their individual literacy acquisition journeys in a particular programme. Students' learning challenges and difficulties were examined in relation to the subject matter which featured in their respective programmes. Furthermore, students' individual attitudes and expectations at the beginning of the programme were taken into account to highlight the difficulty inherent in any attempt to make such predictions. Students as we know respond to the challenges they encounter in different, and at times unexpected, ways, and such responses can threaten their self-esteem and feeling of worth.

The main research question which guided the investigation was:

How do Chinese-educated graduates experience academic literacy practices in their progression from a first degree in their homeland to a Master's level programme in a UK university?

In addition, the three more specific, supplementary questions were:

(i) With this progression, what transitions do these students experience in

pursuing their Master's programmes in the UK?

(ii) In what way do these transitions arise from and relate to differences between their literacy practices at undergraduate level in China and the Masters' Literacies required of them in the UK?

(iii) How are (i) and (ii) affected by features of the three specific Master's programmes investigated?

Three main perspectives informed the overall design of the study: the perspective of transition, which led to the decision to design a three-phase data collection schedule in order to investigate challenges students encountered when they were required to practise literacies at Master's level; the subject-specific literacies required on different programmes, which led to a focus on the particular challenges faced by students when they encountered the specific literacies of their programmes; and the impact of the subject matter which underpinned these students' programmes on their learning journeys.

The current thesis reports the qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews in three disciplinary programmes – *Education, Signal Processing and Communications*, and *Finance and Investment* – in three phases: at the beginning, half way through, and at the end of the taught component prior to the dissertation. A total of 18 students participated in each of the phases, which resulted in a total of fifty-four interviews.

### **1.3 Structure of the Thesis**

**Chapter 1: Introduction.** This first chapter has introduced the thesis, provides the rationale for conducting the research, and explains the significance of it. It furthermore outlines the main scope of the investigation by providing a summary of the current research and also a brief introduction to each of subsequent chapters.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review.** A review of existing literature is provided. This draws upon western research on students' higher education learning experiences, both in a general sense and with specific reference to Chinese students' experiences in western higher education settings, and provides a background against which the current study can be placed. Different aspects of Chinese students' learning experiences – in a different culture; using a different language; in different disciplinary areas; and their learning journeys as transitions – are reviewed. How this current research has been informed by, and has addressed the gap in the literature of previous studies, is examined, and the well-established concept of academic literacy practices is explored.

**Chapter 3: Research Design** gives a detailed account of the research design which was used in the current investigation, and justifications for methodological decisions made, before and during the research process, are provided. Furthermore, issues in terms of my position as a researcher in relation to my interviewees, research validity and the processes of data analysis, and how the findings are presented are discussed in detail.

**Chapters 4, 5, and 6** present the findings of the study which emerged from students' accounts of their learning experiences in each disciplinary context – *Education*, *Signal Processing and Communications*, and *Finance and Investment*. Each findings chapter begins with a detailed introduction to a particular Programme and its corresponding structures, and a background account of every research participant in this Programme before they embarked on their Master's learning is provided. Participants' unique and distinctive learning experiences are presented as case studies, and a discussion of the similarities and differences between each case within the Programme concludes each findings chapter.

**Chapter 7: Discussion and Implications** brings the key findings together and discusses them in relation to previous studies which have been reviewed in Chapter 2. The Discussion chapter compares and contrasts findings from each programme to examine the degree to which the current research makes a contribution to existing



knowledge about Chinese students' learning experiences on Master's programmes in a western pedagogical setting, especially with the development and mastery of their Masters' literacies. The concept of Masters' Literacies, which represents an original and unique contribution to the existing body of literature in the field, is developed in relation to four distinctive features: autonomy in learning; subject discourses; analytical and critical thinking; and interaction with peers and teachers. In the penultimate section the practical, conceptual and methodological implications which arise from the study are discussed. Finally, the limitations of the study are explored and possible directions for future research are suggested.

### Review of Literature

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The aim of this literature review is to establish with maximum clarity what the current state of knowledge is within the field of study related to the topic of this thesis. This breaks down into two more specific objectives: first, to focus and expand our understanding of the field by establishing what concepts, insights, models and empirical findings can be usefully deployed; and second, to find out what we can learn from this literature and, in particular, what remains relatively unknown or poorly understood. We will also consider how the literature has influenced the design of the study that is the core focus of this thesis.

The literature review will focus on the following interrelated themes, each of which represents an important dimension of the experiences of first degree students from one country undertaking a postgraduate programme in another. The first of these is what we know about Master's learning itself. Although relatively large numbers of small-scale studies have been undertaken, some of the key features of study at Master's level have not been clearly established.

The second theme is what we currently know about how students learn and study at university. Although almost all of this literature, as will become apparent, has focused on learning at the undergraduate level, it nevertheless yields important concepts which are equally applicable to postgraduate study.

Thirdly, we shall look at the cultural dimension to this issue – the applicability of western theories to understanding the experiences of Chinese Master's students studying at Western universities. The focus here will be particularly on the challenges experienced by students whose first degree is grounded in a Confucian-oriented notion of teaching and learning, but whose postgraduate programme is

offered by a Western university which applies rather different and Western notions and practices of university learning and teaching.

Fourthly, it is an inescapable fact that students also face the challenge of learning, being taught and being assessed in the language of English when all their previous experiences of that kind had been in Mandarin. Language therefore immediately becomes a problem for Chinese students when they arrive in the UK, and has an impact on their social and academic socialisation in the UK.

A fifth dimension is that of the discipline or subject area that the students are studying. There are two aspects to this dimension to which we need to be alert. The first is that what and how students learn has an important disciplinary character, with the consequence that what it takes to succeed academically in one subject is not necessarily what will also optimise success in a different one. The second aspect is a common but not universal feature of study at Master's level – the subject area represented by the Master's programme often differs from the subject area that was that focus of students' first degrees, which may thus create a very particular challenge of its own.

The sixth section of the chapter is very different from the previous five. It begins the process of drawing what has been gleaned from the previous five sections together. Each of these five dimensions, as will become apparent, represents a challenge for the students of making the transition from one way of thinking and acting to another. The idea of a transition therefore helps us to see each of these five dimensions in themselves as a powerful factor.

In order to understand the students' experiences in an appropriately comprehensive way, it is also necessary in a thesis of this kind to set out a perspective which can encompass all of these dimensions and offer an appropriately integrated and coherent window on the students' experiences. This approach, as will become evident, has its source in a recently emerging school of thought. Each of the previously mentioned sections contributes a fruitful way of looking at and understanding an

aspect of the students' experiences, but none of them suffices in themselves to form the core of a coherent and appropriately rich perspective on the topic of this thesis. Therefore, the closing part of the chapter looks at a recently emerging school of thought on learning – an academic literacies perspective – which can help in considering all of these key dimensions in a more coherent and integrated way. However, for reasons which will become clear, the thesis does not adopt a fully-fledged academic literacies perspective, but rather an adapted and enlarged conception encapsulated in the term 'Masters' Literacies'.

## ***2.2 Learning at Master's Level***

Compared to the undergraduate level, Master's level is considered to be demanding with respect to the advanced level of conceptions of learning and approaches to learning (Knight, 1997). In empirical research undertaken with eighty Master's students from five UK institutions, Master's level study has been empirically found to differ distinctively from undergraduate level study in being characterised by greater depth of individual learning involvement, the higher level of learning approaches, the higher requirement of inter-disciplinary emphasis, the greater expectation of staff roles in learning, and the higher level of applicability of taught knowledge into practice. In the section which follows, we will examine these and other publications to establish the current status of understanding about learning at Master's level and to what extent this understanding is supported by empirical evidence. Because there is a literature based on many small scale studies, some extents we will be cited here and others later in the review.

### ***2.2.1 The higher level of learning at Master's level***

'Master[s] is a step between undergraduate and research' (McEwen, 2005. p.6): on the one hand, compared to undergraduate study, Master's level study is distinctive by its life-long characteristics and limited-length of programme and is more practice-orientated (Knight, 1997; Bache and Hayton, 2012; Woolcock, 2007). On

the other hand, compared to the research in postgraduate courses and of PhD students, taught Master's courses put less emphasis on students making academic contributions and Master's students are, some researchers believe, disadvantaged by limited prior experiences of being members of the teaching and researching communities of their given subjects (Woolcock, 2007). It may therefore be argued that learning at Master's level in the UK is more challenging than learning in undergraduate or research postgraduate programmes. Difficulties in experiencing the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate level may create feelings of anxiety in adjusting to a more advanced level of academic engagement, leading to what has been called 'academic marginalisation' (McClure, 2007).

New Master's students making the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate learning will be challenged by an advanced view of learning: this level of learning places more attention on the students' capability to envisage how to resolve problems which are work-related and, more importantly, students are expected to be able to critically re-frame the situation itself (Knight, 1997). This advanced learning has been described by Argyris and Schön as 'double loop learning' (1978).

In Knight's book *Masterclass* (1997), Argyris and Schön's 'double loop learning' (1978) is frequently cited as a key learning theory which can best indicate this higher order of learning required at Master's level. Argyris and Schön (1978) suggest that single loop learning is sufficient for most of levels of learning, when the learners only look at resolving problems through corrective actions. Double loop learning happens when the learners address more than just the aim of problem-solving, but go beyond to variables which underlie the problem. While this advanced learning challenges UK students, acquiring these skills can be more difficult for Chinese students. This is because, while the international students have not been well-trained in their previous learning experiences (Bache and Hayton, 2012; Huang, 2005; Kember, 2001), the language barrier and lack of relevant prior knowledge also make this challenge more difficult to cope with (McClure, 2007).

Accordingly, mechanically transmitting knowledge from teachers to students is no

longer sufficient in Master's classes (Knowles, 1990). Instead, a more dynamic teaching-learning environment needs to be constructed to facilitate students to reach a higher level of learning (Senge, 1992). This is because the aim of Master's level is to go beyond 'knowing what' to 'knowing how' (Knight, 1997), which can be realised by approaches such as inquiry-based learning (IBL) (Bache and Hayton, 2012) and problem-/project-based learning (PBL) (Huang, 2005; Stewart, 2007).

While PBL is 'an approach to learning through which many students have been enabled to understand their own situations and frameworks so that they are able to perceive how they learn, and how they see themselves as future professionals' (Savin-Baden, 2000, p.2), IBL encompasses PBL approaches and goes beyond them (Deignan, 2009). Accordingly, IBL and PBL facilitate the enhancement of the various capabilities learners require at Master's level, namely critical thinking and independent learning. While in the UK these capabilities have been valued at undergraduate level, they become even more important at Master's level.

### *2.2.2 Critical thinking*

Reflection has received extensive attention because it is a benchmark to distinguish between a lower level of learning and a higher level of learning (for example, Kolb, 1984; Boud and Walker, 1998). PBL environments aim to equip the students with a higher level of competences in organising and integrating information through critical reflection. To put this another way, in order to extend knowledge by creating new knowledge, Master's students have to be equipped with critical capabilities and to experience a transition from their undergraduate programme where it had 'sufficed to reflect existing ideas, to summarise viewpoints or follow procedures' (Athanasou, 1997, p.47).

Although concerns about Chinese overseas students' performances on critical thinking have been widely expressed in the literature, it has mainly been investigated from a cultural perspective. For example, when Chinese students come to a UK university to learn, they encounter challenges created by the UK-situated requirement – critical thinking (Burnapp, 2006). While few researchers have discussed this

issue with reference to the gap between levels of study, the advanced level of critical capabilities required at Master's level undoubtedly becomes a reason why Chinese students find it difficult to learn in the UK if they have not learned critical thinking skills as undergraduates. This is because a successful Master's student in the UK, according to the UK's Quality Assurance Agency, will demonstrate:

...originality in the application of knowledge, and they will understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They will be able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they will show originality in tackling and solving problems. They will have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgment, personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments. (QAA, 2008, p.21-22)

### *2.2.3 Independent learning*

The last quotation suggests that transition to postgraduate study is about more than just critical thinking: it is also about independent learning. In other words, students are required to take individual responsibility for their own learning (Knight, 1997; Reynolds, 1997). This has been demonstrated in empirical research studies both from the perspective of administrators and programme directors (Atkins and Redley, 1998) and the students' perspective (McEwen et al., 2005).

It has not only been suggested but also demonstrated empirically that, compared to UK students, overseas Master's level students are more likely to experience challenges in adapting to independent study and that one reason for this is because overseas students' prior learning experiences have been teacher-reliant (Bache and Hayton, 2012). Although Bache and Hayton's comparative study (2012) found that both UK and international students claimed they had been well-prepared to assume learning independently, when the programme progressed, differences in attitudes towards the teacher-student role expectations were exposed between these two groups of students. While most UK students expected their teachers to act as a facilitator rather than in a dominant role (Bache and Hayton, 2012), some international students, including Chinese students, prefer teachers to give more input in group discussions and lectures (Bache and Hayton, 2012; Burnapp, 2006).

This expectation of international students is also supported in another empirical study. Based on McClure's (2007) study, both international Master's and doctoral students expected their Singapore teachers to function in a 'teaching role' through coursework. They also expected a higher level of guidance in supervision.

#### *2.2.4 Motivational orientations at postgraduate level*

Since postgraduate study is much more challenging than undergraduate study and given that the level of postgraduate students' learning motivation is higher than that of undergraduates (McEwan et al., 2005), the specific factors which motivate them to choose and learn seems to be of primary importance. Although it is not the key focus of this present research, the issue of what motivates students to study at Master's level is relevant because students' reported experience of studying at Master's level may be influenced by their motivations.

According to the literature, there was, until recently, a wide consensus that nearly all types of Master's programmes are taken by students for the purpose of achieving a labour market advantage or enhanced professional performance (Atkins and Redley, 1998). A more detailed study was however done by Bowman (2005) with a view to revealing UK students' motivations for pursuing one-year Master's studies. Three groups of Master's students categorised by their backgrounds were found to have different motivations for registering for a Master's course. Students who were labeled as 'staying on' students because they took Master's studies within the same university and even the same department without a study gap, took Master's programmes motivated by a willingness to learn at young ages and the desire to confirm and extend their educational career. 'Moving on' students, who changed to another subject or institution, took Master's studies to prepare them for a particular career or wanted to return to a previous missed course option (Bowman, 2005, p.238-239). The students in the third group were 'coming back' from the role of employees to that of students and were motivated by dissatisfaction in their workplace (Bowman, 2005, p.240).

Although Bowman's study was based on UK-resident Master's students, its



findings are nonetheless relevant to this investigation of Chinese overseas Master's students' experiences at the University of Edinburgh. Firstly, research participants in this present study can be described as either 'moving on' students who chose to learn in the UK and (in some cases) chose Master's programmes in subject areas which were different from their subject of undergraduate study, or 'coming back' students experiencing the role of being students again. Secondly, Bowman's inquiry found that changes happened as students progressed from a lower to a higher level of programme. It is presumed in this study that Chinese students may undergo similar experiences.

Although extensive attention has been paid to the transition from school learning to learning at higher education level (for example, McInnis, 2001; Pitkethley and Prosser, 2001; Yorke, 2000), there is little literature focusing on the transition from undergraduate learning to learning at Master's level. Therefore, with a view to constructing a theoretical framework for this current research, it is worth looking at the relevant theories and key empirical research conducted at the undergraduate level.

### ***2.3 Learning at Undergraduate Level***

Although there have been many small-scale studies of undergraduate students' learning, conceptually these have not provided insights into the nature of Master's-level learning. However, it is vital for two reasons to look at the key concepts and theories used in these studies. First, although the existing important concepts, theories and models were proposed in the western context to investigate learning in Higher Education, they are applicable to researching learning at Master's level in the UK. Second, because the Chinese Master's students concerned in the present research were previously undergraduate students, they may have brought their old perceptions of learning shaped by previous undergraduate learning experiences to their Master's learning experiences in the UK. Therefore, this section will help us to understand how they coped with the challenges of making the

transition from an undergraduate to a postgraduate level of study.

### *2.3.1 Researching learning in higher education*

Research into student learning in higher education in the UK (as elsewhere in Europe, Australia and Hong Kong) has undergone a major transformation in which the behaviourist and cognitivist perspectives commonly found in much North American research have given way to social constructivist perspectives. The latter has entailed a shift in conceptualising learning in higher education not as accumulation of knowledge but rather as construction and transformation of knowledge (Marton and Säljö, 2005; Blumenfeld, 1992). Originating from this new dominant perspective, studies concerning students' learning experiences have developed a distinctive rationale focusing particularly on student approaches to learning (SAL) and with a distinctive emphasis on the student's perspective, contextual influences and individual factors (for example, Marton et al., 2005; Biggs, 1987a; Entwistle, 2005). Marton and colleagues in Sweden have applied the SAL research rationale from a phenomenological standpoint which gathers data mainly through qualitative interviews and focuses particularly on *how* the students react according to *what* they perceive from the specific teaching-learning environment. Elsewhere, however, Biggs in Australia and Entwistle and his colleagues in the UK have combined semi-structured interviews with more quantitative surveys probing students' learning preferences in a general sense (Watkins, 1996). Nevertheless, whatever their data-gathering strategies, all the SAL research is shaped and strongly influenced by the fundamental distinction first drawn by Marton and Säljö (2005) between surface and deep learning approaches to learning.

### *2.3.2 Approaches to learning in higher education*

In Marton and Säljö's work (2005), to cope with specific tasks, while surface approaches refer to the fact that students direct attention towards learning the text itself (*the sign*), deep approaches are adopted when they look for the intentional content of the text (*what is signified*) by active and reflective attitudes.

Reviewing the literature, there is a variety of terminologies to name the university students' different approaches to learning as Table 2.1 illustrates:

<b>Leading to</b> <b>The author(s)</b>	<b>Low quality learning outcomes</b>	<b>High quality learning outcomes</b>
Ausubel (1968)	Rote learning	Meaningful learning
Svensson (1977)	Atomistic approach	Holistic approach
Schmeck et al. (1977)	Methodical study; Fact retention	Deep processing; Elaborative processing
Thomas and Bain (1984)	Reproductive learning	Transformational learning
Biggs (1987a)	Surface approach, Achieving or strategic approach	Deep approach
Wittrock (1990)	Reproductive processing	Generative processing
Ballard (1996)	Reproductive approach	Speculative approach
Marton and S äj ö (2005)	Surface learning	Deep learning

**Table 2.1 Distinct dichotomies of learning approaches/ information processing levels**

However, the terms 'surface/deep learning approaches' (Ford, 1981; Schmeck, 1983) are often used to suggest two dominantly-accepted contrasting dichotomies:

In short, both qualitative and quantitative research procedures have produced evidence from a reasonable variety of national systems of higher education for the broad distinction between two fundamental approaches to studying: first an orientation towards comprehending the meaning of the materials to be learned; and, second, an orientation towards merely being able to reproduce those materials for the purposes of academic assessment. (Richardson, 1994, p.463)

Many writers have defined the concepts of deep and surface learning in similar ways (for example, Marton, 1983; Biggs, 1987a; Entwistle, 2005). Entwistle's definitions are reproduced in Table 2.2.

A student who uses the <i>deep approach</i> to transform knowledge by:	A student who uses the <i>surface approach</i> to reproduce knowledge by:
Intention – to understand ideas for [oneself];	Intention – to cope with course requirements
Relating ideas to previous knowledge and experiences;	Studying without reflecting on either purpose or strategy;
Looking for patterns and underlying principles;	Treating the course as unrelated bits of knowledge;
Checking evidence and relating it to conclusions;	Memorizing facts and procedures routinely;
Examining logic and argument cautiously and critically;	Finding difficulty in making sense of new ideas presented;
Becoming actively interested in the course content.	Feeling undue pressure and worry about work.

**Table 2.2 Features of defining deep and surface approaches (Entwistle, 2005, p.19)**

Whereas some researchers warn that the dichotomies of deep versus surface approaches may be dangerous in giving inaccurate description to students' learning (Webb, 1997; Malcolm and Zukas, 2001; Haggis, 2003), other researchers claim that these bipolar categories may omit nuances of students' learning experiences (Volet and Chalmers, 1992). Noting that early work only focuses on the students' learning approaches in reading texts in an experimental context (for example, Marton and Säjö, 2005; Svensson, 1977), an increasing number of researchers investigating students' everyday learning experiences, especially in the circumstance of preparing assessments, advocated a need to modify the traditional distinction between deep and surface approaches to learning. Subsequently, a third category of learning approaches – achieving or strategic approach – was proposed (Biggs, 1987a; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Entwistle et al., 2000). While the surface and deep approaches focus on the students' learning intentions (either for the purpose of reproducing or transforming) and learning approaches to process knowledge (Perry, 1981), the third type of learning approach emphasises students' intention of achieving personal goals and their learning organisation activities.

Studies usually describe students who adopt this third learning approach as 'cue-seekers' (Ramsden, 1979). Because of competition and ego-enhancement, 'cue-seekers' are usually motivated to obtain the highest possible grades by organising their efforts (Entwistle and Peterson, 2004), for example, by devoting time and effort in an effective way, being sensitive to cues of examinations and trying to fulfill teachers' expectations regarding assessments (Entwistle and Ramsden,

1983; Biggs, 1987a; Kember, 2000; Entwistle, 2005).

Entwistle (2000) has argued that the strategic approach is not a context-independent characteristic of student learning; the students adopt a surface approach or a deep approach according to their subjective perceptions about the learning content and the requirements of assessments. Subsequently, the strategic approach has been widely used to describe Chinese university students approach to learning (for example, Silva, 1992; Kember and Gow, 1990) and, especially, the approach of Chinese Master's students in the UK (for example, Gao, 2006).

However, Kember (1996, 2000) has argued that applying the three-part distinction between approaches to Chinese students is inappropriate. Instead, he sees student approaches to learning on a developmental continuum (see Table 2.3) moving from

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Intention</b>	<b>Strategy</b>
Surface	Memorizing without understanding	Rote-learning
Intermediate 1	Primarily memorizing	Strategic attempt to reach limited understanding as an aid to memorization
Understanding and memorizing	Understanding and memorizing	Seeking comprehension then committing to memory; Repetition and memorizing to reach understanding
Intermediate 2	Primarily understanding	Strategic memorization for examination or task after understanding reached
Deep	Understanding	Seeking comprehension

**Table 2.3 Kember's continuum of learning approaches (Kember, 2000, p.104)**

learning only by memorization without an intention of understanding (memorizing *without understanding*) to learning with the intention to understand (*understanding*).

Kember (1996) also links different forms of memorization to corresponding learning strategies and learning approaches adopted at specific developmental stages of the learning process. His continuum of learning approaches not only shows that the employment of learning approaches is context-situated, it also avoids mis-perceiving the Chinese students' culture-underpinned motivations and learning approaches by adopting other western terminologies, such as achievement motivation and achieving

strategies. Kember (1996, 2000) adds two developmental stages – Intermediate 1 and 2 to indicate the different levels of understanding. More specifically, Intermediate 1 suggests that although students initially aim to memorize without understanding, they finally realise that it is easier to memorize if they do achieve a certain degree of selective understanding. Moreover, Intermediate 2 indicates that, whereas students are initially supposed to seek deep understanding, their perceptions of assessments constrain their deep learning activities and make them take approaches which lead to reproducing material knowledge (Kember, 1996, 2000).

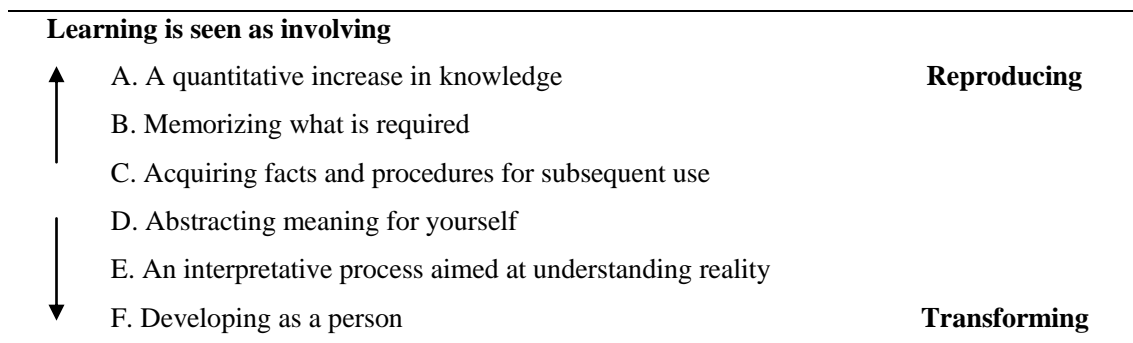
### *2.3.3 Conceptions of learning*

Concerns about the applicability of the Western-derived concepts of learning approaches to Chinese learners have also been raised in connection with another major construct that also stems from SAL research and is empirically associated with ‘approach to learning’, namely, conceptions of learning.

While the researchers discussed above have found differences in students’ approaches to learning to cope with specific tasks, a more general level of research has drawn attention to a related abstract concept – conceptions of learning. This is because studies of learning approaches tended to assume that learning approaches adopted by students reflect conceptions of learning which are shaped by their past experiences of similar circumstance (Marton and Säljö, 2005). In other words, the approaches students adopt may, to a significant extent, be influenced by what they think learning is and what it entails (Entwistle, 2009). Relying on his and colleagues’ early empirical work, Entwistle (2009) suggests ‘conceptions of learning’ and ‘approaches to learning’ are linked by a key factor – ‘intentions of learning’ – which is one of the factors influencing student choice of learning approach.

Various researchers have attempted to conceptualise learning. For example, Biggs (1994) argues that there are two main ways of looking at conceptions of learning: while in the qualitative view learning is to understand and make meaning through connecting new knowledge to prior knowledge, the quantitative view regards

learning acquired by knowledge accumulation. However, Säljö's (1979) hierarchy of conceptions of learning is more sophisticated, because, as illustrated in Figure 2.1 below, it not only suggests the intention-orientated conceptions of learning by two



**Figure 2.1 A hierarchy of conceptions of learning (Marton and Säljö, 2005)**

pairs of the ‘what-how’ associations (A and B sub-categories, and D and E sub-categories) but also presents the distinction of quantitative view of learning (A, B, C) and qualitative view of learning (D, E).

According to Marton and Säljö (2005), students who view learning as reproducing information (Perry, 1981), see it only as an activity of building solid pieces of knowledge quantitatively (‘what’: the A sub-category) by means of memorizing information (‘how’: the B sub-second category). This group of students is deemed to employ surface approaches with an orientation towards memorization, which is not favored by university teachers. On the other hand, students who regard learning as a transforming process of understanding reality (Perry, 1981) (‘what’: the E sub-category) and believe that learning tends to be achieved by abstracting meaning from their own experiences (‘how’: the D sub-category), are usually regarded as ‘active learners’ (Anderson, 1995, p.70), because they are thought to adopt a deep approach to transform and construct knowledge as their own.

The sixth interpretation of learning, namely ‘F. Developing as a person’, subsequently added into Marton and Säljö’s table (2005), indicates that this learning is a process of learners’ conscious developments motivated by personal interests and an aim of changing society. Therefore, older mature students – including Chinese

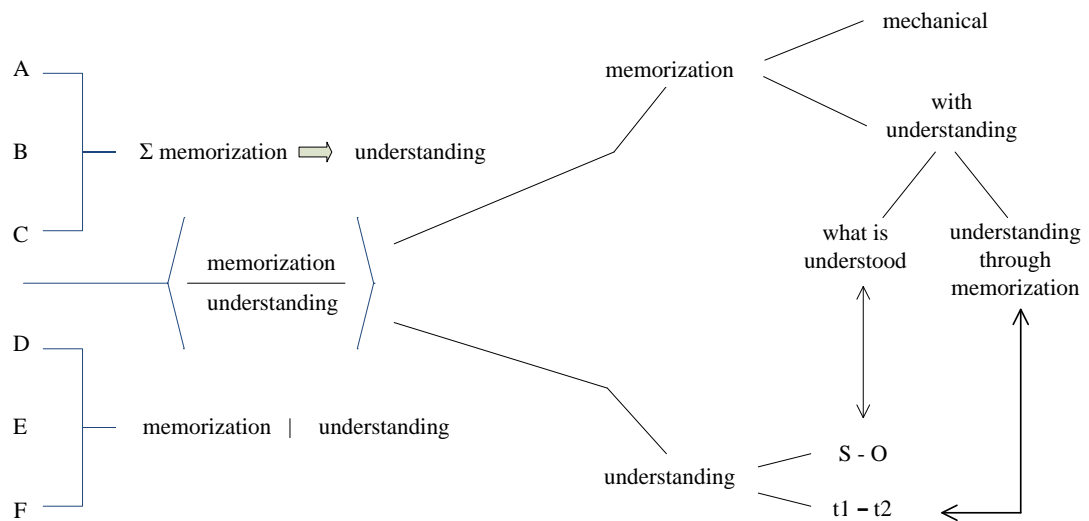
mature students (Xu, 2007) as a concern of this current thesis – may tend to show greater personal commitment to society.

However, some researchers including Marton himself (Marton et al, 1996; Watkins, 1996; Biggs, 1996b; Kember, 1996, 2000), question the applicability of this Western-produced concept and western theories to understanding the experience of Chinese students studying overseas.

Marton and his colleagues' (1996) criticism of the original six conceptualisations of learning is that they are not reasonably and appropriately categorised. In the original conceptualisation (Figure 2.1, on page 20), the six conceptualisations were grouped in two dimensions: while D to F propose putting the emphasis on 'meaning' constitutions, A to C conceptualisations are without this emphasis but focus more on students' 'visible memorization activities'. Therefore, as Figure 2.2 illustrates, the A to C dimension of conceptualisations suggests that understanding and memorizing are the same in nature – understanding could be attained based on the sum of accumulative memories; the D to F dimension conceptualisations views understanding and memorizing as separate and even contradictory activities. Marton and his colleagues (1996) realise that the reasoning in the original model is not sound and further criticise the six original conceptualisations as being too narrow in terms of simply equating memorization to surface learning.

This is similar to Lee's critique (1996), but Marton and his colleagues go further by arguing that, because both understanding and memorizing activities are intertwined in the Chinese learners, it is necessary to recognise the role of repetition to distinguish *mechanical memorization* and *memorization with understanding*. While mechanical memorization is tied in with rote/surface learning, memorization with understanding tends to lead to deep understanding. They claim that their data suggests that the Chinese deepen understanding through repetitions and that each repetition could enrich their understanding about text meanings in different aspects. Additionally, they find differences within the activities of *memorization with*





**Figure 2.2 Relationships between forms of memorization and understanding (Marton et al., 1996, p.80)**

*understanding* rather than between *mechanical memorization* and *memorization with understanding*. In other words, to obtain deep understanding, although Chinese people usually carry out understanding and memorizing almost simultaneously, there are differences between the two processes: while memorizing *what is understood* is defined as a subject-object (*S-O*) sense of understanding, *understanding through memorization* is conceived as a temporal sense of understanding enhanced and deepened from time 1 to time 2 (*t1-t2*).

Marton and his colleagues' research (1996) is worthwhile in that it demonstrates empirically that the western conceptions of learning are not universally applicable to Chinese learners. More importantly, their research reveals the complexities of how Chinese learners approach deep understanding. While Marton and his colleagues' research (1996) shows concern for Chinese learners' culture-situated cognition (Brown et al, 1989), their data is not closely related to this present research. This is because their data was obtained from Chinese school teachers rather than from university students. However, it is still important because it uses their analysis of adult Chinese student learning experiences to suggest that the hierarchical conceptions of learning need further modifications. Moreover, it helps to alert us to when students' intelligence improves and they develop their conceptions of learning

over time.

Kember (1996, 2000) however, compared to most SAL researchers, gives less and, some suggest, inadequate, attention to other contextual factors, for example disciplinary contexts (Entwistle, 2000; Hounsell and Hounsell, 2007) and level of study (Säljö, 1979). Moreover, he does not consider that even though a learner has adopted deep approaches to learning on one course, there might be situations where the learner uses surface approaches to learning in other course modules because of contextual factors. Therefore the current research is interested in investigating what these exceptions are and in what circumstances Chinese Master's students will use other approaches to learning even though they are capable of employing deep approaches.

#### *2.3.4 Motivational orientations to undergraduate learning*

Western research has also found an association between learning motivations and the concepts of approaches and conceptions. There are however indications here too that such findings cannot be straightforwardly applied to Chinese learners. In other words, western research also has limited applicability when it comes to interpreting Chinese students' learning motivations.

According to Entwistle (1998), 'motivation' measures 'the differing amounts of effort that students put into their work' and he describes that behaviour as either 'driven' by needs or 'pulled' towards goals (Entwistle, 1998, p.79-80). While a main distinction – intrinsic and extrinsic associate correspondingly to deep approaches and surface approaches – it helps to explain whether effort is made because of the learning content itself (intrinsic motivations) or because of outer attractions (extrinsic motivations), such as benefits or penalization (Entwistle, 1998; Kember, 2000). However the traditional western distinctions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations result in mis-perceptions about Chinese students' learning experiences (Kember, 1996, 2000; Skyrme, 2007), especially the narrow conceptualisations of extrinsic motivations, such as achievement motivations (Kember, 2000; Biggs, 1998) and career motivations (Lai et al, 2012; Kember, 2000).

Put in another way, although both achievement motivations and career motivations employed by western students are commonly observed by the researchers as the extrinsic dimension of motivations, they function to trigger and enhance the Chinese students' intrinsic motivations and self-regulation (Kember, 2000). It means that the boundary between the extrinsic and the intrinsic distinctions in the western classification is blurred when applied to Chinese students' learning experiences. Compared to achievement motivation however, career motivation is of more significance to Chinese students.

### *Career motivation*

Chinese students are strongly motivated by career motivations (Kember, 2000; Lai et al., 2012), which stem from the value which is either called, in the theory of consumption values' terminology, 'functional value' (LeBlanc and Nguyen, 1999; Lai et al, 2012) or, in terms of the learning orientations' concept, 'vocational orientation' (Beaty et al, 2005). Although different researchers use different terms to explain the source of the students' career motivations, these two different perspectives come to similar conclusions about students' motivations (Table 2.4). While the former theory views the students as consumers of education to explain why the students choose to learn particular subjects in higher education (Lovelock, 1983; Modell, 2005; Singleton-Jackson et al, 2010; Lai et al, 2012), the latter

<b>The theory of consumption values</b>	<b>Orientations to learning</b>	<b>Aims</b>
Functional value	Vocational orientation	valuing higher education as a guarantee to obtain future employment, economic benefits and promotions
Social value	Social orientation	To enjoy activities within a social group
Emotional value	Academic orientation	To follow intellectual interests
Epistemic value	Personal orientation	To acquire personal development and satisfy one's desire for knowledge
Conditional value		Consumer choice and judgment influenced by situational variables, such as the size of the class and teaching-learning facilities.

**Table 2.4 Similarities and differences in different perspectives categorising the students' motivational orientations**

perspective indicates 'differences in students' aims, their concerns, and the type of interest they have in the course...' (Entwistle, 1998, p.80-81).

When addressing the Chinese university students' career motivations, Lai and her colleagues' quantitative research about undergraduate students in China (2012) sub-classifies the traditional functional values into two aspects – the experiential aspect and the usefulness aspect. While the first aspect associates the students' educational experiences in the university with what is going to be good for their future career, in the second aspect the qualification is viewed as guaranteeing career promotion and monetary rewards (Lai et al, 2012). Because Chinese people suppose that higher education is necessary to acquire monetary power in the capital sense (Farrell et al, 2006) and to realise personal and social improvements in the moral sense (Lee, 1996), Chinese students not only study for the self-satisfaction of gaining economic power in society, but they are also more likely to see career aspirations as motivational (Lai et al, 2012). Consequently, and in contrast to western theorists, the career motivations of Chinese students can take both intrinsic (self-determined motivation) and extrinsic (career-related motivation) forms. That might be the reason why Chinese students prefer some subject programmes to others (Lai et al., 2012) and why they expect the curriculum to provide career-related knowledge and skills. However, if career-orientated expectations are not satisfied, Chinese students' motivation, especially their intrinsic motivation, would probably decrease (Kember, 2000).

### *2.3.5 Self-regulation of learning*

A final important facet of students' learning is how students self-regulate their learning activities. While this theory of learning has been well-studied in a general sense, the uniqueness of Master's students' self-regulation seems to have been marginalised. Despite this, as with the preceding discussions of concepts and theories, Vermunt and Verloop's review of the traditional taxonomy of students' self-regulation process (1999), and Zimmerman's latest overview (2002), may be relevant to our understanding of Master's students' self-regulated learning.

Table 2.5 shows the differences between, and similarities in, Vermunt and Verloop's review and Zimmerman's latest summary. While Vermunt and Verloop emphasise

students' cognitive and affective activities for processing subject knowledge, and coping with their emotions, Zimmerman's study places attention on students' practical skills for achieving the intended learning goals. It should be acknowledged that, whilst both studies help to synthesise all prior theories with regard to students' self-regulation, they only aim to summarise rather than provide empirical evidence to support or develop theory. In addition, besides lacking specificity to a particular learning level of students, neither review indicates whether self-regulation activities differ from one student to another, nor do they discuss whether, or to what extent, students' national cultural backgrounds impact on their learning.

Vermunt and Verloop's review of the traditional taxonomy of students' self-regulation process (1999)		Zimmerman's latest overview (2002, p.66)
Three categories of activities	Featured activities include...	
<p>The cognitive category</p> <p>(activities where students process subject matter. These kind of activities lead directly to learning outcomes in terms of changes in students' knowledge base.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Relating/structuring</i> different parts of subject matter into an organised whole;</li> <li>• <i>Analysing</i> different aspects of a problem by breaking down the whole into parts;</li> <li>• <i>Concretizing/applying</i> abstract knowledge into the real world;</li> <li>• <i>Memorizing/rehearsing</i> theories of subject knowledge on the purpose of knowledge reproduction;</li> <li>• <i>Critically processing</i> previous literature to develop one's own arguments;</li> <li>• <i>Selecting</i> the most important information on the subject matter.</li> </ul>	
<p>The affective category</p> <p>(activities where students cope with emotions arising during learning.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Motivating</i> ones' learning /<i>expecting</i> ones' learning outcomes;</li> <li>• <i>Concentrating/exerting effort</i> on ones' learning;</li> <li>• <i>Attributing</i> learning outcomes to causal factors/<i>judging oneself</i> in terms of learning capacities;</li> <li>• <i>Appraising</i> ones' learning achievements</li> <li>• <i>Dealing with emotions</i> to maintain self-confidence.</li> </ul>	
<p>The regulative/metacognitive category</p> <p>(activities where students decide on learning content exerting control over their processing and affective activities to steer the course and outcomes of their learning.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Orienting</i> learning goals by <i>planning</i> a learning process with considerations of the characteristics of the learning task itself as well as the learning situation and time constraint;</li> <li>• <i>Monitoring/testing/diagnosing</i> ones' learning process to ensure learning outcomes lead to the intended learning goals;</li> <li>• <i>Adjusting</i> current learning behaviour to better suit the learning goals and assessment criteria;</li> <li>• <i>Evaluating/reflecting</i> learning outcomes in comparison with ones' initial expectations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting specific proximal goals for oneself;</li> <li>• Adopting powerful strategies for attaining these goals;</li> <li>• Monitoring one's performance;</li> <li>• Restructuring one's learning environment to make it compatible with one's goals;</li> <li>• Managing one's time effectively;</li> <li>• Self-evaluating one's methods;</li> <li>• Attributing results to causation; and</li> <li>• Adapting future methods.</li> </ul>

**Table 2.5 Vermunt and Verloop's review (1999) compared with Zimmerman's overview (2002)**

A recurring theme in this section of the literature review has been the question of how applicable Western concepts and findings are to Chinese learners. In the next section, we address this theme more directly, by considering the cultural dimensions to learning.

## **2.4 Learning across Cultures**

The experience of Chinese learners coming to study in western contexts has already been extensively researched. However, the applicability of western theories to understanding Chinese students' learning experiences deserves to be examined. Although writers who research the experiences of Chinese learners do so from different perspectives, hardly any of them avoid taking a culturally specific perspective. This is the case regardless of whether they take an essentialist or a non-essentialist approach (which will be discussed more fully below). Although there is a debate about which approach is more appropriate, it is less important than the fact that learning styles differs across cultures. What we know about the relationship between Chinese and western higher education experiences is that the differences between them are substantial and that adapting from a familiar Chinese culture to a less familiar UK one in order to bridge this gap is challenging for students.

### **2.4.1 The myths of the Chinese learners**

Writers who have contributed to the research about Chinese learners have either taken a culturally essentialist or, to use an alternative term, 'big culture' approach (regarding 'culture' as 'a concrete social phenomenon which represents the essential character of a particular nation', Holliday, 1999a, p.38) or a non-essentialist or 'small culture' approach (believing 'culture' is 'a movable concept used by different people at different times to suit purposes of identity, politics and science', Holliday, 1999a, p.38). This is because the majority of Chinese students are assumed to bring different 'cultural scripts' (Welikala and Watkins, 2008; Currie, 2007) to the western academic context which differs, to a greater or lesser extent, from the Chinese

academic context they came from. Whether Chinese learners can adapt and assimilate to the new kind of norms of academic culture in the UK during their Master's journey is therefore a determinative factor in their success (Blue, 1993; Gill, 2007; Currie, 2007). However, Chinese students learning overseas are frequently reported as ill-equipped and less ready for the western-specific cultural pedagogies at Master's level (Stewart, 2007; Bache and Hayton, 2012; Chen and Bennett, 2012). Adapting to UK pedagogies appropriately is not however easy because to guarantee the adoption of a new pedagogy requires Chinese students to adopt a corresponding set of cultural values situated in the UK academic context (Richards, 1997). It is therefore the differences and similarities of cultural characteristics between learners from China and western learners which attract researchers.

There is ongoing controversy about Chinese learners' characteristics, because two kinds of literature describe them contradictorily. One body of literature describes them as being passive in class communications, relying on teachers, lacking in critical argumentation and adopting inappropriate learning strategies (Carson, 1992; Liu, 1998; Huang, 2005; Shi, 2006; Jin and Cortazzi, 2006; Clark and Gieve, 2006; Campbell and Li, 2008). Thus being culturally stereotyped in the deficit model, in contrast to 'a western good student', a Chinese learner is depicted as a 'reduced other' (Grimshaw, 2007) or a dependent learner (Li, 2002) who usually, for the purpose of knowledge conservation (reproducing knowledge materials) (Li, 2002), uses surface learning (Marton and Säljö, 2005) or rote learning (Li, 2002) approaches in a teaching-learning climate characterised by large power distance (the large extent of inequity between the teachers and the students) and collectivism (the extent of moral stances towards individual or collective achievements and the relationship between the one to the others) (Hofstede, 1986, 1997; Salili, 1996).

However, despite these negative characterisations, some studies have begun to argue that Chinese students' achievements represent 'the paradox of Chinese learners': they are more likely to be high achievers than their western counterparts in certain subjects such as mathematics (Biggs and Watkins, 2001).



The second body of literature therefore refutes the traditional deficit model by offering an alternative perspective which sees two cultures as equally valued but different. This group of researchers will be introduced later. From this multicultural perspective, the characteristics of the learners from China are re-formulated as being active in learning engagement, critical in constructing knowledge and flexible in choosing appropriate learning strategies (Kember and Gow, 1990; Biggs and Watkins 2001; Grimshaw, 2007). Ironically, whether seeing learners from China as positive learners or commenting on them negatively, the dominant research studies (for example, Flowerdew, 1998; Biggs and Watkins, 2001; Hu, 2002; Shi, 2006) attribute the root cause to the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) (Bigg, 1996b).

The recent research has tried to avoid culturally stereotyping Chinese learners by either providing individual variations contradictory with ‘the large culture’ or by probing individuals’ self-shift in the ‘small cultures’ (Holliday, 1999b). The subsequent sections will discuss what the most appropriate research perspective might be when interpreting the Chinese students’ experiences of academic literacy practices in the UK in a cultural context.

#### *2.4.2 The ‘large culture’ approach with the cultural-essentialist position*

The large culture approach is termed by Holliday (1999b) to refer to a cultural-essentialist assumption which conceives the concept of culture as the most typical, homogeneous and exclusive characteristics; and also as the all-encompassing systems of values and conventions to shape an individual’s personal behavior and perceptions (Atkinson, 2012). There has been a widely-accepted view which has been empirically demonstrated that the educational philosophy of a nation penetrates and is linked with its national culture (for example, Meyer, 1977; DeHaan, 2008), even though – as in the case of China – the teachers and the students are not aware of the impact of the dominant culture, for example CHC (Lee, 1996). So the majority of researchers attempt to examine Chinese learners through the lens of CHC.

However, differences are also found among researchers who take the same ‘large

culture' perspective. The traditional and narrow group of researchers tries to generalise about Chinese learners by referring to CHC without careful consideration of developing socio-political contexts and individual variations and concludes that East Asian Cultures distinctively contrast with that of the UK (for example Hofstede, 2001; Phuong-Mai et al., 2005). However, the recent tendency in researching Chinese learners through this perspective aims to identify their common key characteristics with the assistance of CHC and recognises individual variations (such as Biggs and Watkins, 2001; and, specifically in the UK context empirical research: Cross and Hitchcock, 2007; McMahon, 2011; Wang et al., 2012). Although there has been agreement that Chinese students' learning cannot be over-generalised by cultural characteristics, the large/national culture is regarded as one of the factors responsible for learning shocks due to different kinds of pedagogies in Anglo-America and other world zones (Griffiths et al., 2005). Accordingly, in terms of the present research, the common CHC-patterned characteristics of Chinese Master's learners will be given adequate attention. However, only applying this perspective is not enough as will be elaborated in detail in the following sections.

Concerning the impact of differences between two large cultures (CHC and the UK culture), the traditional and dominant studies, which aim to explain the Chinese students' Master's learning experiences in western contexts from a cultural perspective, focus on highlighting 'cultural clash' (Chen and Bennett, 2012). The researchers find 'learning shock' (Okorochoa, 1996; Griffiths et al., 2005) caused by dislocating values of learning and communication (Currie, 2007) during Chinese learners' Master's journeys, especially when they come into contact with western-contextualised teaching-learning pedagogies – requiring autonomous learning, critical argumentation, learning through interaction in terms of UK-based curriculum, pedagogies and assessment. Therefore the authors attribute challenges in Chinese Master's students' learning experiences to their lack of adequate readiness and realistic expectations (Gill, 2007; Bamford, 2008). Given the limited length of Master's programmes, the mis-match between what Chinese students expect their UK teachers to do and the expectations their teachers have of them becomes problematic if it is not coped with quickly.

#### *2.4.2.1 The match/mis-match of expectations of the teacher-student roles*

According to the literature, the main reason why many Chinese students compared to some of their western counterparts are more likely to hesitate in adopting western-conceptualised learners' responsibilities, such as autonomous learning, critical argumentation, and learning through interaction, is because of Chinese students' complex emotional perceptions and expectations of the role of western teachers. According to Currie (2007), the key representative theory to understand the teacher-student relationship (interpersonal relationships) is Hofstede's (1997): the CHC's collectivism orientation focuses on maintaining harmony in interpersonal relationships, and power distance between the teachers and the students due to different hierarchical positions. On the one hand, there is a large power distance in the Chinese socio-cultural context. This has been empirically assessed and reported in one rating index of countries, which suggests that China has the highest score and Britain has the second lowest (Fletcher and Bohn, 1998). This, it has been suggested, explains Chinese learners' perceptions of the teacher's role and students' responses to unfamiliar pedagogies. These will be discussed further in a later section. On the other hand, the fact that CHC is 'collectivist in nature' (Watkins, 2000, p.167) and emphasises keeping people in a group in a harmonious way makes Chinese students less likely to challenge their teachers.

In other words, while the academic culture in the UK compared to that in China has more sense of teacher-student equality, the role of teachers in China is empowered as the authority and is less likely to be challenged by lower hierarchical entities, such as younger or subordinate people, especially in the academic context (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997). Correspondingly, whilst teachers in the UK expect students to take learners' responsibilities as 'good learners' in their eyes, the teachers in China are expected to take charge in all stages of learning (Chan and Drover, 1997). Because CHC values managing inter-personal relationships to maintain harmony in the community, some Chinese learners expect teachers to keep a close relationship in their personal life. For example, they are expected to act as a role of counsellor offering students empathetic support and life advice, especially for the international students who

suffer more psychological vulnerability than home students (Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, although Chinese students come to the UK, when entering university their expectation may, to varying extents, have been shaped by their previous learning experience in China. However, if both UK teachers and Chinese learners fail to anticipate the other's expectations, misunderstandings may arise. While the UK teachers 'pathologise' the Chinese students as passive and incompetent learners (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997), some students may think their teachers are less responsible for teaching (Chen and Bennett, 2012). The mis-matches between the responsibilities and roles of teachers and students contribute to the learning shocks and challenges in autonomous learning, critical argumentation and learning through interaction experienced by Chinese overseas students.

#### *2.4.2.2 Autonomous learning*

According to Bamford (2008), differences between required study methods in the UK context and those requirements in China become problematic to the learners from China. While independent study is valued in their overseas learning sojourn, it is less emphasised in their home country. Many Chinese students are observed to be less active in taking learners' responsibilities and more likely to rely on teachers' highly structured guidance. Although it is regarded by the non-essentialist perspective as a western mis-perception, it has been in line with some empirical research studies about Chinese Master's students in the UK (for example Tobbell et al., 2010).

#### *2.4.2.3 Critical perspective*

Many Chinese students find it especially challenging to learn how to engage in critical argumentation, debates and analysis. This has been reported by Chinese students in western teaching-learning contexts across different disciplines, especially at Master's level in Australia (Richards, 1997, with the focus on MBA courses), in New Zealand (Holmes, 2004, with an emphasis on the business school) and in UK universities (Sturdy and Gabriel, 2000, and Currie, 2007, for, particularly, MBA programmes; Atkinson, 1997, in the TESOL programme; and Durkin, 2008a across a

variety of schools and disciplines). Although British students may experience similar challenges in acquiring and presenting critical ability, many Master's students from China are still regarded as less capable of managing the critical requirements. This is because compared to Chinese learners, their UK peers have been better equipped with knowledge and awareness of critical argumentation during their undergraduate studies (Kember, 2001). Agreeing with Kember (2001), other researchers (such as Bamford, 2008; Chen and Bennett, 2012) maintain a similar position that the Chinese learners are not familiar with and well-trained by their previous teaching-learning experiences in China. Even though the Chinese students have heard of the requirement of 'critical thinking' at Master's level in the UK context, they do not understand what this means conceptually and how to do it practically to meet the UK Master's requirements (Burnapp, 2006). To put it another way, the Chinese students are not, as the traditional and narrow western research believes ('that is how they are'), but have not had the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills before coming to the UK.

Besides the readiness of knowledge and awareness of how to approach knowledge critically, the many Chinese students' psychological obstacles which are associated with Hofstede's cultural theories (1997) have been suggested as another reason for them being less willing to learn in a critical way: due to avoidance of losing face, (concerns about being publicly humiliated), avoidance of uncertainty (the degrees of willingness to accept unsure and ambiguous knowledge), and the desire to maintain harmony, many Chinese students are less happy with criticising others and being criticised. These three reasons have been demonstrated by empirical studies as the main psychological/moral reasons for the Chinese students' hesitation in adopting a critical perspective in the UK context (Huang, 2005; Currie, 2007; Durkin, 2008a) especially at Master's level. Although the studies of both Currie (2007) and Durkin (2008a) involve some Chinese students from various East Asian countries and areas (for example, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand and Indonesia), the majority of participants are learners from mainland China. Currie's (2007) findings suggest that at the beginning of Master's programmes some Chinese students try to avoid 'the battlefield mentality' (Thayer-Bacon, 1993) because of fears of losing face

and avoidance of cultural offence to teachers and peers. In addition, Durkin (2008a) notices that the openness towards a critical perspective, and willingness to engage in argumentation, are linked to cultural perceptions about learning and knowledge. More explicitly, the UK culture perceives that learning could be approached, and knowledge could be explored, by critical argumentation in an aggressive way, as a result of the view that knowledge needs to be tested and negotiated, and that East Asian cultures value and respect truth (Hofstede and Bond, 1984).

#### *2.4.2.4 Learning through interaction*

In the large culture perspective, the majority of Chinese students is reported to be passive in engaging in interaction, because, it is argued, they are ‘deficient’ in undertaking independent learning responsibilities and critical awareness and, in addition, have to contend with psychological barriers, such as the need to maintain face and avoid giving offence (McMahon, 2011). In addition, due to different national cultures and related academic cultures, many Chinese students do not conceive of learning by interaction as an effective pedagogy to approach knowledge (Currie, 2007). With regard to this, empirical research demonstrates the reasons: they are expecting the teacher to take charge of the class by offering structured and detailed guidance about subject knowledge, learning procedures and assessment requirements (Chen and Bennett, 2012) rather than wasting time on valuing students’ contributions in the class (Currie, 2007).

This finding seems to be countered by another cultural viewpoint which suggests that they are, compared to their western peers, more willing to work as a learning group outside the classroom because they are more experienced in collaborative learning contexts (Yu, 1980), more active in an informal environment (Tiong and Yong, 2004), more willing to make good use of class time to ‘[talk] of the known rather than talking to know’ (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998, p.743) and more glad to make an effort after the class to gain required competences related to coping skills and know-how strategies (Clifford, 1986).

However these two kinds of viewpoints are not in contrast because they have

apparently suggested that, while the Chinese students respond positively to the cultural-bound interactions, they are less likely to be willing to engage in multi-cultural interactions.

While the preceding literature suggests some common cultural characteristics presented by some Chinese students, an alternative perspective based on a different assumption argues that researching the Chinese students only from a large culture (CHC) perspective is not enough.

#### *2.4.3 The 'small cultures' approach with a learning-situated focus*

Although some western researchers and educational staff may benefit from the preceding arguments about how Chinese learners may commonly behave and think, 'the large culture' perspective is usually criticised for its over-focus on national differences, such as is suggested in McSweeney's critique of Hofstede's work concerning the neglect of variations (2002). Similarly, Clark and Gieve (2006) directly point out that no one research study could empirically find a causal relationship between CHC and the Chinese learners' learning performance. Although Hofstede's power relationship argument has been supported with empirical evidence gathered in an Australian business company (Fletcher and Bohn, 1998), power distance in human psychological thinking is less convincingly confirmed by quantitative data. However, both these studies (Hofstede, 1997 and Fletcher and Bohn, 1998) were conducted in an organisational rather than an educational setting. Therefore, increasing numbers of researchers worry that the large culture approach may lead to ethnocentric bias or racism. An alternative perspective therefore is to take into consideration socio-contextual factors. In contrast to the large culture perspective, the small cultures approach, with its learning-situated position, usually concentrates on similarities and views the Chinese learners' experiences as context-situated rather than CHC-predetermined (Volet and Renshaw, 1996; Clark and Gieve, 2006).

An early group of researchers advocated re-examining learners from China. In the seminal book – *Teaching the Chinese learner: psychological and pedagogical*

*perspectives*, Watkins and Biggs (1996), although still using the concepts of ‘Chinese students/learners’ and ‘CHC’ featured by the large culture approach, defended the Chinese learners as a complex and varied group of individuals. This is because Chinese educational values are not as different from the dominant western values as theories suggest. Following this new assumption, Grimshaw (2007) tried to break up the traditional stereotypes by taking a fresh look at Chinese university students’ real teaching-learning experiences in recent China. He discovered that the so-called large power relationship between university teachers and their students is not as large as western researchers thought because Chinese students resist their teachers’ power and protect their interests in their own way by, for example, evaluating teachers’ teaching performances on forms and showing passivity and inattention to the teachers’ teaching. Thus, the new research into the teaching-learning phenomenon at a university in China becomes evidence to refute the traditional and narrow perceptions regarding Chinese students. Although Grimshaw’s research (2007) does not provide a full elaboration of the research design, he hints that due to recent social developments in China, Chinese students’ predispositions and prior learning experiences deserve to be followed up.

To explain the reasons why contradictory interpretations of the same group of students have emerged, Jin (1992) argues that learning activities are perceived differently according to different conventions and norms across CHC-impacted educational culture and the western educational culture. For example, in western countries, the learner-centered classroom is constructed, represented and realised by students’ verbal participation through teacher-student and peer communication. In contrast, due to the limitations of the contextual facilities and for the purpose of maintaining harmony, the classroom and teamwork in China encourage students’ listening and observation (Littlewood, 2000; Durkin, 2011). However, it does not mean that the Chinese learners are not cognitively engaged (Holliday, 2005; Grimshaw, 2007). This argument has been confirmed by several pieces of empirical research in the UK-context, for example, a UK-based research study by Wang, Harding and Mai (2012), which investigated Chinese undergraduate business students’ learning experiences. Although this longitudinal research is not



specifically about Master's students, it addresses characteristic pedagogies in a business school – teamwork and critical argumentation, which is relevant to one group of targeted programme students in the present research. It shows that although some Chinese students tend to avoid conflicts by not criticising team members in an assertive way, they do not blindly follow others' opinions, even those of more knowledgeable peers. The Chinese students present flexibilities and complex characteristics in accepting the opinions of others. A similar conclusion is also presented in a study which focuses on Chinese students' Master's journeys in the UK: Durkin's qualitative research (2011) shows that although there is initially a mis-match between UK teachers' and Chinese students' expectations due to the different kinds of academic norms and values students encounter at the beginning of their journey, Chinese students are able to cope with critical requirements in group discussion and academic writing in their own culturally acceptable way. In other words, the ways of expressing critical argumentation are different across national cultures.

Thus, more and more research employs 'the small cultures' approach and a non-essentialist assumption to claim that the Chinese students' learning experiences are more context-situated rather than solely cultural-determined, especially research based in the UK context at the Master's level (for example, Currie, 2007; Clark and Gieve, 2006; Huang, 2005). For example, with regard to a common stereotype, that of passivity in engaging learning by interaction, McMahon (2001) drawing on qualitative data, asserts that although big class sizes in China discourage students from speaking, this weakness has been compensated by more teacher-student interaction and their warm interpersonal relationship after the class.

Based on the increasing number of recent challenges to the traditional large culture approach and a growing interest in breaking down the 'impassible cultural gulfs', some literature asserts confidently that some aspects of western-featured pedagogies, such as group work and independent learning, are not culturally sensitive to CHC (Nguyen et al., 2006; Currie, 2007; Grimshaw, 2007). However, this assertion has been quickly opposed by the research by Heffernan, Morrison and Sweeney (2010).

They point out that westernised pedagogies should be modified before use with Chinese students. Although their research is a comparative study of Chinese students and Australian students taking the same undergraduate programme, it is relevant to the research undertaken for this thesis because the Chinese Master's students targeted in the present research are also from a different teaching-learning context compared to their western peers in the UK's programme. Relying on survey data collected from 181 Australian undergraduate students studying marketing in Australia and 235 Chinese undergraduate students doing the same course delivered in China by the same Australian university, their findings suggest that, although both the Chinese students and their Australian peers share similarities in preferring visual aids and paper materials to assist in learning, many Chinese students are less able to do creative learning and grasp the theoretical system as a big picture. This means, they argue, that compared to their Australian peers, the Chinese undergraduate students are less good at adopting western pedagogies. A similar viewpoint is proposed by Chen and Bennett (2012). Conducting longitudinal qualitative research based in Australia, they find that many Chinese students studying for a Master of Education qualification bring dispositions from their original learning background to their sojourn country, which leads to 'the meeting of two histories' in terms of previous and current small cultures (Bourdieu, 1996, p.256). They propose that even if Australian teachers have explained the requirements and expectations of constructivist pedagogies delivered in the Australian settings, the Chinese students still appear to be less well-prepared to take their learners' responsibilities such as reading after the class. Even though the authors admit that the non-Chinese students may also encounter similar challenges, their findings support the traditional stereotypes regarding the Chinese students.

It seems therefore, that regardless of whether researchers take a 'large culture' or a 'small cultures' perspective, there is the potential for bias in both which suggests neither perspective can, on its own, give a clear answer. Tian and Lowe (2012) end up taking this viewpoint after conducting a piece of research taking the 'small cultures' approach. Their longitudinal empirical research, which explored some Chinese Master's students' experiences of formative feedback in a UK university

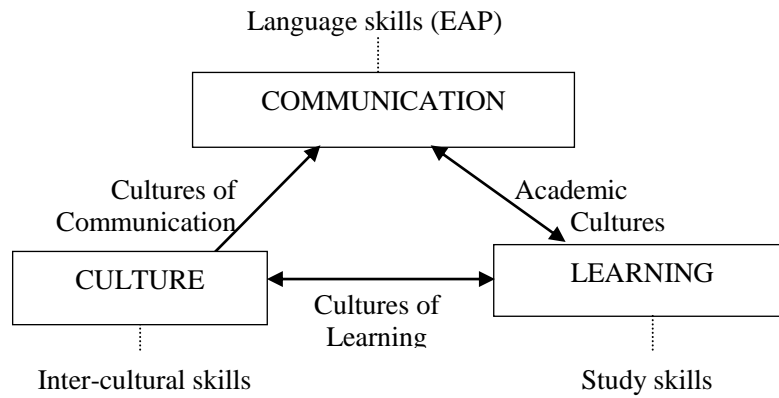
during one-year programmes, found that, while Chinese students and their UK teachers communicate, both the message receiver and deliverer govern communication through respective cultural filters and bring them to the front into a negotiation. Their own cultural norms and values are either determined by the large culture (the national culture) or the small cultures (context-situated cultures) or a combination of both. Therefore it is necessary to co-construct both perspectives.

#### *2.4.4 Co-constructing the large culture and the small cultures approaches*

Based on the above, the present research which investigates some Chinese Master's learners will address both the large culture and the small cultures standpoints: while the large culture perspective helps to examine the general tendencies of Chinese students conditioned by similar national backgrounds, the small cultures perspective will contribute sensitivity to individual variations and specific socio-contextual situations.

Some researchers have already tried to create or find a mediating term in order to investigate cross-cultural learners' experiences by relating the large culture and small cultures. These include Bernstein's 'educational knowledge code' (1977), Cortazzi and Jin's model (1997), Welikala and Watkins' 'cultural scripts' (2008), Currie's 'cultural dislocation' (2007) and Zhao and Bourne's 'multiple literacies' (2011). While Bernstein (1977) uses 'educational knowledge code' as a key characteristic to compare and analyse two meeting educational cultures as shown in Figure 2.3 below, Cortazzi and Jin (1997) identify multicultural learning involving three kinds of cultures, namely cultures of learning, cultures of communication and academic cultures. Compared to Bernstein (1977), Cortazzi and Jin's model (1997) begins by distinguishing and linking the large culture and the small cultures and focusing on the key role of language as 'cultural message'.

Moreover, they realise that there may be a communication gap between Chinese students and their UK teachers. So they propose 'cultural synergy' as a solution. This encourages interaction between each culture in the learning/teaching process by encouraging an awareness of individual's academic culture, culture of



**Figure 2.3 Cultural infusions in communication and learning (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997) (EAP=English for Academic Purposes)**

communication and culture of learning. However, although the model depicts one kind of culture – academic culture – it does not take into account subject related issues. This is because it is born in the context of EAP which only aims to teach the international students English in a general sense, such as general English required in the school of social sciences, the humanities or the natural sciences, rather than the specialised English demanded by specific subjects. Therefore this study does not focus attention on the impact of disciplinary differences on Chinese students’ teaching-learning experiences, but is more focused on the role of language in teaching-learning environments.

Welikala and Watkins (2008) follow and extend the former two studies’ positions in a wider teaching-learning context using the concept of ‘cultural scripts’. The term refers to the cultural foundations shaping international students’ ways of approaching knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning within a specific learning and teaching context. In other words, they see UK teachers’ teaching and Chinese students’ learning activities as an interaction involving the exchange of two different ‘cultural scripts’. More than that, they are concerned about both the teachers’ and the students’ individual variations in perceptions of teacher and student roles, the conceptions of knowledge and ways of approaching knowledge. While UK teachers and Chinese students interact, their respective ‘cultural scripts’ are negotiating and trying to meet each other’s expectations and diminish the

communication gap. Figure 2.4 below shows that Welikala and Watkin (2008) not only notice the match/mis-match of the cultural scripts brought out by UK teacher

		Learners' conception of teaching	
		Transmission	Changing understanding
Teachers' conception of teaching	Transmission	Match is good Quality of learning is impaired	Some mismatch Learners adapt to the teacher's view
	Changing understanding	Mismatch Some learners adapt to the teacher's view	Match is good Quality of learning is high

**Figure 2.4 Learners' and teachers' conception of learning (Welikala and Watkins, 2008, p.42)**

and Chinese student interactions, they also observe that the extent of the match/mismatch is related to the quality of cross-cultural teaching and learning. However, although Welikala and Watkins' research is based on interview data, it lacks detail about research design, for example, the rationale of methodology, sampling criteria, data analysis and ethical problems. Moreover, compared to Cortazzi and Jin's model (1997), although their concept of 'cultural scripts' suggests Chinese students and their UK teachers may have different interpretations of learning concepts and effective approaches to acquiring knowledge, they lack a language for mediating in communication between the cultures. Finally, similar to the preceding studies, their 'cultural scripts' do not consider discipline-specific issues.

Compared to 'cultural scripts', Currie's 'cultural dislocation' (2007) concept moves things forward by focusing on subject issues. Similar to Welikala and Watkins (2008), firstly he points out the evident mis-match between the Chinese students' home country values and host country values in the large cultural dimension but, more importantly, Currie notices the impact of disciplinary cultures in the small cultural dimension. Currie conducts a two-phase research study to investigate some Chinese students' journey when taking an MBA programme in the UK with holistic perspectives on the Chinese students, UK students, UK MBA directors and Management teachers across four business schools. The findings demonstrate that the home cultural dispositions of these Chinese students did not match the UK teachers' expectations. So they experienced cultural shocks in adapting to

UK-situated and MBA-characterised pedagogies, such as group discussion and class debate. Finally, Currie finds that in the multi-cultural learning environment, the quality of teachers' teaching contributes to Chinese students' transitions on their Master's journeys.

However, this research study is methodologically flawed: although the concept of 'cultural dislocation' is based on comprehensive research perspectives including both the students and their teachers, case sites are across four business schools in the UK. Firstly, while the majority of student participants were interviewed in the first business school, all the teachers' data was collected by the combination of interview and observation in the other four business schools. Despite this, this study does not compare the programme structures, module courses and assessment methods in one business school to those in the others. Because the students and the teachers are not from the same school the data may be less able to convincingly support the argument that there is a cultural dislocation between the Chinese students and their UK teachers. Secondly, the most important participants, the Chinese students, are from different countries and areas, namely Singapore, Taiwan and mainland China. Nonetheless, they are referred to, without any sub-categories, as 'Chinese students', which may result in neglecting individual differences and different socio-cultural histories. Thirdly, although the new concept of cultural dislocation highlights both the national and disciplinary cultures, it does not pay any attention to language, which may be another challenging factor in the learning experience of Chinese students in the UK.

An exception to these relatively narrow perspectives is the study by Zhao and Bourne (2011) which takes a 'multiple literacies' perspective to demonstrate the relationship of language, cultures and subject issues. Zhao and Bourne (2011) argue that UK teachers should have an awareness of 'multiple literacies'. This 'multiple literacies' concept will be fully explained in **2.7 An Integrated Perspective – Transitions and Masters' Literacies**.

## ***2.5 Learning across Language***

In addition to the cultural dimension, it is also necessary to discuss the Chinese students' language challenge because these students are learning and are assessed in the UK in a different language – English. Because they are used to being taught and assessed in their first language – Mandarin – in China, English immediately becomes a challenge when they come to the UK because English is the medium of communication both for the purpose of adapting in the UK socially and for learning academically. In other words, language proficiency has an influence on students' academic adjustment (in various forms which international students are likely to take) but also on socio-cultural adjustment (Hofstede, 1997). This is because, as also discussed in this section, language refers not only to vocabularies and rules of grammar, but also involves a cultural dimension.

### ***2.5.1 The social-cultural dimension of language***

Many researchers have alerted Chinese students and their UK teachers to the fact that the language barrier has been found as a common and core problem for Chinese overseas students. Although the students have satisfied the entrance requirement of the IELTS English test, this does not mean that they are capable English speakers in terms of living and learning in the UK (Bamford, 2008; Edwards and An, 2006). The IELTS test is not necessarily considered to be truly representative of the actual English competence level expected in UK academic contexts (Carroll, 2005). Brown and Holloway's empirical study (2008) of international one-year Master's students (including Chinese students) found that students experienced 'language shock' when encountering 'real' English, especially at the beginning of their UK academic journey.

For Chinese students in particular, language shock is caused by the mis-match between the differences between English learned in China and English encountered in the UK (Edwards et al., 2007; Jin, 1992). According to the literature, there are two dimensions of language, namely 'knowledge of form' and 'knowledge of substance' (Eskey, 1986, p.18) or in other words 'basic communicative interpersonal

skills (BICS)' and 'cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)' (Cummins, 1980). While the former dimension that is 'knowledge of form' or 'BICS' refers to rhetorical patterns of language, the latter dimension of language is specific to the socio-cultural context. Therefore, where the aim is to teach English as a 'tool' for the purpose of gaining high exam scores to get social and economic mobility (Gao, 2005; Zhao and Campbell, 1995), teaching English's socio-cultural dimension is less likely to be a teachers' concern in China (Gao, 2005). Although this need may have begun to be recognised among Chinese teachers of English now, some Chinese teachers are less able to teach it (Hu, 2002).

Accordingly, Chinese students find difficulties in adapting socially to living in the UK and socialising with UK peers (Crane et al., 2009). For example, McMahon (2011) has suggested that, due to fear of using English when seeing doctors, undergraduate, Master's and PhD level Chinese students lack confidence in using the British health care system.

In addition, according to Skyrme (2007), even though Chinese students are well capable of using English for everyday activities, they still face challenges in terms of mastering and using academic English in the academic context with its particular socio-cultural knowledge. Thus, compared to general English, academic English is more difficult to cope with and more closely related to Chinese students' academic success. Schweisfurth and Gu (2009) confirm empirically that, while Chinese students have been able to cope with general English in social life, academic English is still problematic in adapting to new pedagogies and enhancing confidence in collaborative group discussion with UK students. Although Schweisfurth and Gu's study (2009) investigates Chinese undergraduate students, academic English is more challenging for Chinese Master's students. This is because mastery of academic English takes time which one-year Master's students may not have (Carroll and Ryan, 2005).

This is fundamental because, compared to general English, academic English is more complicated and demanding in requiring the Chinese students to be good 'bilingual



speakers'. In other words, the students should not only be able to identify cultural schemata or frames of reference (Kirkpatrick and Xu, 2002), they also have to make a good switch between identities, more particularly between cognitive ways of thinking from the Chinese kind to the English kind (Norton, 2000). Therefore, while being English speakers, the Chinese students have to both lose their old identity of their first language and re-construct their new identity of their second language (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000). However, the new identity of English is difficult to re-construct as a complete English monolingual. Instead, they will mix their old identity of Chinese with the new identity of English:

The bilingual is NOT the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals; rather, he or she has a unique and specific linguistic configuration. The coexistence and constant interaction of the two languages in the bilingual has produced a different but complete linguistic entity. (Grosjean, 1989, p.6)

In other words, Chinese students will bring their previous learning experiences in China to the UK to cope with learning tasks in English and to understand key threshold concepts prevailing in the UK academic culture. This will be reflected in Chinese students' experiences of writing in English.

### *Writing in English*

Being a marker of academic success, writing occupies a particular position which 'offers nonnative speakers opportunities for finding textual homes outside the boundaries of local or national communities' (Kramsch and Lam, 1999, p.71). Unfortunately, it becomes the commonest and greatest difficulty for Chinese students (Burke and Wyatt-Smith, 1996).

The gap between the western teachers' expectations of student writing and Chinese students' patterns of writing has been accounted for as a result of the gap between Chinese and western socio-cultural perspectives on writing (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). Although modern Chinese academic writing has been found to be more similar in terms of structure to that which is required in the west (Mohan and Lo, 1985; Kirkpatrick, 1997), the Chinese students' inductive structure of writing (background-before-main-point pattern) still confuses the western teachers who

expect to read a deductive structure (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). This is because Chinese students attempt to transfer their old discourse pattern of writing in Chinese to that of English (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006).

Other specific difficulties which Chinese students have while trying to write an academic essay in English are also attributable to the different culture-situated languages. For example, Chinese writers tend to avoid offering personal critical perspectives, but are instead more likely to quote or paraphrase other authors' arguments to show their respect for the authority (Tsao, 1983; Matalene, 1985). However, this may lead to plagiarism, as discussed in Edwards and An's study (2006). One reason for plagiarism is the Chinese students' limited proficiency of English. The most important reason however is that, because they come from a different socio-cultural background, Chinese students have difficulty understanding completely the key threshold concepts of their western teachers' requirements (Edwards and An, 2006), for example 'substantial contribution to the field' and 'independent research' at the PhD level (Chen et al., 2003). While these key threshold concepts are taken for granted by western teachers, they are only communicated implicitly rather than explicitly to the students (Edwards and An, 2006).

### *2.5.2 Disciplinary language*

However, while the language barrier has its roots in differences in socio-cultures, there is another challenge created by the fact that language is discipline-specific. Therefore even English native speakers are not familiar with specialist vocabulary and discipline-specific discourses (Edwards and An, 2006), let alone Chinese students (Flowerdew and Miller, 1992). Nevertheless, while even Chinese PhD students find difficulties in understanding discipline-specific language (Edwards and An, 2006), Chinese Master's students are more likely to be challenged because their academic schedule is more intensive. This challenge contributes to increasing pressures on Chinese students at the beginning of their journey (Brown and Holloway, 2008), especially for some students who have changed subjects.

While Chinese students have been challenged by lack of proficiency in understanding subject terminologies, it is not clear what help is available to them: indeed, a gap between EAP courses and subject courses has been highlighted in the literature. While EAP teachers tend to focus on teaching general academic vocabulary and structures but lack knowledge about discipline-specific language (Edwards and An, 2006), subject specialist teachers also encounter difficulties: their limited knowledge with regard to teaching English makes them less able to meet the students' particular linguistic and learning needs (Bamford, 2008; Edwards and An, 2006). Even where subject specialist teachers have been aware of international students' needs, they may nonetheless prefer to give a generic class rather than sharing the responsibility for teaching English (Love and Arkoudis, 2006).

### *Speaking in English*

Chinese students have to find ways of coping with this lack of support from teachers. It has been widely observed that their coping strategy is to use Chinese, their first language, to scaffold comprehension of specialist language in English. Chinese students prefer speaking in Chinese either in classroom group discussions (Edwards et al., 2007) or in spontaneous collaborative learning groups outside the classroom (Tang, 1996). However, the fact that the language barrier makes Chinese students less actively engage in the class and possibly creates a psychological barrier to talking with UK peers is also cited as a contributory factor (Carroll and Ryan, 2005; Ward and Rana-Deuba, 1999). Speaking Chinese in the UK classroom is perceived to be helpful by Chinese students and some of their UK teachers because this assists them to cope both with content and context, whereas in some other UK classes teachers perceive this to be unhelpful because it reduces opportunities for Chinese students to identify and acquire subject specific discourses (Edwards and An, 2006).

However, the language barrier is not the only problem hampering their learning engagement. **Learning across Disciplines** is another problem for them because it requires them to change ways of thinking to communicate with other academic community members.

## **2.6 Learning across Disciplines**

Although many of the studies concerning subject matter are apparently limited to the undergraduate level, it has been commonly argued that learning differs across disciplines and that the extent of these differences depends on subjects. Although few studies have focused on three targeted programmes as the current research does, learning experiences in these subjects (*Signal Processing and Communications [SPC]*, *Finance and Investments [FI]*, and *Education*), are presumed to be different in particular aspects. This is because according to previous studies, they are classified in different knowledge domains, which require different disciplinary characters to achieve success. These domain differences generate challenges for the students who try to jump this gap in adapting from their familiar first disciplinary community in China to the less familiar second disciplinary community in the UK.

### **2.6.1 Disciplinary socialisation**

Although some attention has been given to investigating how students learn in a discipline from the perspective of socialisation (for example, Purves, 1986; Nesi and Gardener, 2007; Smart et al., 2000), it has been relatively modest, but its significance for the current research is far from negligible, for three reasons. First, the disciplinary dimension is more evident and intensive at the postgraduate level than the undergraduate level (Becher and Trowler, 2001) but the socialisation aspects are also especially important because postgraduate study places more attention on learning in a larger environment of faculty and institution outside the classroom (Tinto, 2006-2007). Additionally, the focus of the present research is the one-year UK Master's which is of a shorter duration than four-year Scottish undergraduate courses or three year undergraduate courses in other parts of the UK, and consequently the need to socialise in a new disciplinary community by recognising disciplinary characteristics becomes more urgent and challenging for the students concerned – especially since (compared to undergraduates) postgraduates are nearer to novice academic practitioners in status (McCune and Hounsell, 2005). Third, a tendency to teach disciplinary conventions implicitly rather explicitly (Lenze, 1995)

makes disciplinary socialisation more difficult especially for Chinese students who are not familiar with UK universities and whose first language is not English.

The concept of academic discipline is usually defined in terms of its socio-cultural aspects – disciplinary conventions, norms and language. For example, it has been variously defined as ‘a rhetorical community’ (Purve, 1986, p.39), ‘a field of enquiry’ (Becher, 1987), or ‘a community of discourse’ (Apple, 1972, p.76); as representing its practitioners’ ‘cultural capital’ and practices (Becher, 1994, 1990); as a ‘moral order’ which defines ‘the basic beliefs, values, norms and aspirations prevailing in the [disciplinary] culture’ (Ylijoki, 2000, p.341); and in terms of the goals and intentions of education (Smart and Ethington, 1995; Norton et al., 2005). In such instances, academic discipline is chiefly defined from cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives, for example as representing ‘an academic tribe and territory’ (Becher and Trowler, 2001) and it is only or mainly understood from the perspective of the individual in the process of constructing disciplinary characteristics (Trowler and Knight, 1999). A more recent school of thought with a broader focus on situated learning theory – concerned for example with context-specific socialisation through learning within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) – has greater resonance for the present study, and will be more fully unpacked in **2.7 An Integrated Perspective – Transitions and Masters’ Literacies**.

Therefore, socialising in a disciplinary community, students are required to master a corresponding set of disciplinary conventions norms and language to become a member within this community. Otherwise, ‘failure to comply with these implicit rules will undoubtedly affect the [postgraduate] student’s standing within the group’ (Gerholm, 1985, p.265). This socialisation takes time, especially for Chinese Master’s students who have been used to using one way of thinking and practising in their familiar undergraduate subject in China and have to learn to use a different way in another discipline in the UK.

Similar terminologies have been proposed to encompass all disciplinary

characteristics, for example ‘ways of thinking and practising (WTP)’ (Hounsell et al., 2005) or ‘ways of knowing’ (Baker et al., 1995) or ‘ways of being’ (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Here, WTP is given a place because it directly suggests two dimensions of socialisation in a discipline, namely ways of thinking and ways of practicing. It refers to:

...terms with particular understandings, forms of discourse, values or ways of acting which are regarded as central to graduate-level mastery of a discipline or subject area... (McCune and Hounsell, 2005, p.257)

More exactly, it is:

...not confined to knowledge and understanding, but could also take in subject-specific skills and know-how, an evolving familiarity with the values and conventions governing scholarly communication within the relevant disciplinary and professional community, and even a nascent meta-understanding of how new knowledge within the field was generated. (Hounsell and Anderson, 2005, p.1)

Acquiring WTP is not only the ‘ticket’ Chinese students need to have to enter a new disciplinary community (McCune and Hounsell, 2005; Reimann et al., 2005) but also what these students will get from the disciplinary socialisation which enables them to act like a professional ‘expert’ (Hounsell and Anderson, 2005; McCune and Hounsell, 2005; Hounsell et al., 2005). A professional ‘expert’ is able to synthesise three apprenticeships:

A cognitive apprenticeship wherein one learns to think like a professional, a practical apprenticeship where one learns to perform like a professional, and a moral apprenticeship where one learns to think and act in a responsible and ethical manner that integrates across all three domains. (Schulman, 2005, p.3)

WTP are also subject-specific. This has been demonstrated empirically in studies examining WTP in various disciplinary communities in UK universities, for example in Electronic Engineering (Entwistle et al., 2005), in History (Hounsell and Anderson, 2005) and in Economics (Reimann et al., 2005). These studies demonstrate that deep or surface approaches to learning differ from subject to subject because each subject has its own distinctive WTP. Table 2.6 demonstrates different manifestations of learning approaches in specific subject areas.

<b>Drew et al's reformulation in fashion design (2002)</b>	Approach A: adopting a product-focused strategy with the intention to demonstrate technical competence.
	Approach B: adopting a product-focused strategy with the intention to develop the design process.
	Approach C: adopting a process-focused strategy with the intention to develop the design process.
	Approach D: adopting a concept-focused strategy with the intention to develop own conceptions.
<b>Case and Marshall's reformulation in engineering (2009)</b>	Surface approach: adopting a strategy of memorizing information with the intention to pass the test.
	Procedural surface approach: adopting a strategy of problem-solving with the intention to pass the test.
	Procedural deep approach: adopting a strategy of problem-solving with the intention to understanding.
	Conceptual deep approach: adopting a strategy of relating concepts with the intention to understanding.
<b>Bruce et al.'s reformulation in Information Technology (2004)</b>	Following: where learning to programme is experienced as 'getting through' the unit.
	Coding: where learning to programme is experienced as learning to code.
	Understanding and integrating: where learning to programme is experienced as learning to write a programme through understanding and integrating concepts.
	Problem solving: where learning to programme is experienced as learning to do what it takes to solve a problem.
	Participating or enculturation: where learning to programme is experienced as discovering what it means to become a programmer.

**Table 2.6 Different manifestations of deep/surface approaches to learning across subjects**

While differences of WTP have been demonstrated in students' passive everyday learning experiences, they become more evident when students engage in active learning activities to cope with learning tasks, especially writing tasks (McCune and Hounsell, 2005). This is because research on different WTP suggests that certain key criteria of good writing may not be readily transferable from one subject to another (Nesi and Gardner, 2007).

Some illustrations may be helpful. Because every discipline is established according to certain degrees of disciplinary consensus in terms of inquiry methods and the nature of knowledge (Kuhn, 1970), it is observed that, compared to social sciences which is co-existing and competing, science subjects rely on the well-defined paradigm. Thus, good science writers should presume that their audiences have got a similar volume of scientific knowledge as themselves so the aim of writing is to 'report and explain' factual knowledge (Parry, 1998; Bazerman, 2000; Becher, 1987). Conversely, writers in social sciences, aiming to 'explanation and argument', have to construct a theoretical framework and get research data to demonstrate that their findings are reasonable under certain conditions (Parry, 1998, p.297; Bazerman, 2000; Becher, 1987). By contrast, writers in humanities need to present their audience with their personal interpretation and perspective to demonstrate their 'argument with recounting and narrative' (Parry, 1998, p.297; Bazerman, 2000; Becher, 1987).

Looking from the student's perspective rather than the perspective of subject-teachers, a further observation is also suggested: the inability of students to develop an appropriate kind of writer-reader relationship in a given subject suggests that those novices of a discipline – 'basic writers' – are unable to negotiate with academic discourses in communities by mimicking the writings of experts with power and wisdom (Bartholomae, 1985). Although the Bartholomae study (1985) is based on the perspective of first-year inexperienced students, it still offers insights to the current study. This is because he suggests that these basic writers' problematic writing is not simply because of lack of language competence but due to lack of competence in negotiating with disciplinary discourses.

Later researchers combine these two perspectives – teacher/discipline perspective and student perspective – by investigating the gap between teachers' and students' understanding of expectations of good writing (for example, Hounsell, 1987; Lea and Street, 1998). This new perspective is significant because it suggests that a particular challenge emerges if students misunderstand the teachers'/disciplinary requirements of learning tasks by using inappropriate WTP in a given subject



(Hounsell, 2005; c.f. also Prosser and Webb, 1994; Campbell et al., 1998). This finding is shown in Hounsell's empirical research (1987) which is based on UK undergraduate students in History and Psychology. He finds that the gap between teacher and student conceptualisations of essay writing results in students' mis-understandings and confusion about the teachers' feedback. However, Hounsell's research participants do not include students studying pure-soft subjects (a full account of 'soft' and 'hard' subjects is provided on p.55-56). The current study suggests that a gap may also exist between UK teachers and Chinese students and as a result of this a vicious circle may occur: while Chinese students' inappropriate WTP results in their confusion about teachers' feedback, this confusion will continue to affect their writing in a given subject area adversely.

### *2.6.2 Disciplinary distinctiveness of its own*

If, because of socio-cultural characteristics, the Chinese students are challenged by the need to master a new disciplinary character to adapt learning in a new disciplinary community, another particular challenge is created. This is because, due to epistemological characteristics of subjects/disciplines, there is a common but not universal fact that the focuses of these students' subject areas at the Master's level is usually different from those in their first degree.

Although each discipline has a nature of its own, there is an early debate about the hypotheses of epistemological beliefs. There is a substantial number of studies which either support the domain-general hypothesis (for example, Perry, 1970; Ryan, 1984; Glenberg and Epstein, 1987) or domain-specific hypothesis (for example, Becher, 1989; Biglan, 1973a, 1973b; Hofer, 2000; Paulsen and Well, 1998). However, a new approach is to synthesise these two contrasting hypotheses and thus argue that epistemological beliefs are moderately domain general at particular times (Schommer and Walker, 1995; Schommer-Aikins et al, 2003).

The distinctive characteristics of a discipline can be better represented by using classifications. The two classification schemes which are the most frequently cited and the most relevant to the current research are Biglan (1973a, 1973b) and Becher

and Trowler (2001).

### 2.6.2.1 Biglan's model

Biglan's multi-dimensional scheme (1973b) is composed of two contrasting pairs to classify disciplinary domains, namely hard-soft and pure-applied. The current study focuses on three programmes – *Signal Processing and Communications (SPC)*, *Finance and Investment (FI)* and *Education*. Therefore, as shown in Table 2.7, *SPC* (similar to Computer Science) is characterised as a hard-applied subject which

Task area	Hard		Soft	
	Nonlife system	Life system	Nonlife system	Life system
<b>Pure</b>	Astronomy	Botany	English	Anthropology
	Chemistry	Entomology	German	Political Science
	Geology	Microbiology	History	Psychology
	Math	Physiology	Philosophy	Sociology
	Physics	Zoology	Russian	
<b>Applied</b>	Ceramic engineering	Agronomy	Communications	Educational administration and supervision
	Civil engineering	Dairy Science	Accounting	Secondary and continuing education
	Computer science	Horticulture	Finance	Special education
	Mechanical engineering	Agricultural economics	Economics	Vocational and technical education

**Table 2.7 Biglan's scheme of disciplinary classification (Biglan, 1973b, p.207)**

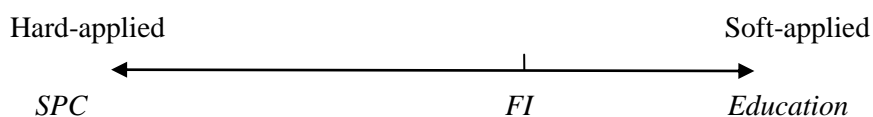
focuses on applied knowledge and has high levels of paradigmatic agreement in terms of the methods of inquiry. Both *FI* and *Education* are categorised as soft-applied subjects, because they emphasise applied knowledge based on

ambiguous knowledge attitudes and ill-defined knowledge.

### 2.6.2.2 *Becher's continua*

While the Biglan's model aims to distinguish disciplines by concrete typologies, several researchers have challenged the importance of this classification approach (Clark, 1984) and Biglan's greater emphasis on bipolar distinctions than on similarities (Bayer, 1987). Thus Becher's ambiguous disciplinary classification becomes special, because his focus is only to make theoretical generalisations. This is critiqued as a limitation (Alise, 2008).

Although three targeted programmes (namely *SPC*, *FI* and *Education*) which the present writer is concerned with are not suggested in Becher's continua, his method of describing disciplinary characteristics by continua is valuable. This is because Becher's method can avoid leading to absolute normalization especially as these three programmes are developing and improving in every year. Moreover, taking into account that Biglan's classification has been empirically supported as a valid classification scheme (for example Smart and Elton, 1982), the current researcher will therefore combine Biglan's and Becher's models to feature three programmes and describe their relationships: according to Figure 2.5, while *Education* is featured



**Figure 2.5** *SPC*, *FI* and *Education* described by disciplinary characteristics

as soft-applied, *SPC* is characterised as hard-applied. *FI* is more likely to be soft-applied, but harder than *Education* and much softer than *SPC*.

### 2.6.2.3 *Transition and disciplinary changes*

According to the preceding discussion, where Chinese students have decided to study in another subject in the UK, they will face challenges created by a transition

involving abandoning an old disciplinary character and adopting a new disciplinary character. However, the extent of this disciplinary transition depends on the degree of distinctiveness of the new discipline. For example, for some Chinese participants who have changed subjects greatly across different schools (for example from the school of Humanities to the school of Social Sciences), the transition will be greater than for others who just changed slightly within the same school (for example from Accounting to *FI* within the same Business school).

The perspective of transition is not only valuable in the transitional experiences with respect to the disciplinary context, it is also of value in attempting to glean all the dimensions of transitions.

### ***2.7 An Integrated Perspective – Transitions and Masters' Literacies***

While the preceding five sections have suggested five different ways of looking at and understanding the students' learning experiences and outlined the different challenges the students face in making the transition from one way of thinking and acting to another, this sixth section of the chapter aims to create a more coherent and comprehensive perspective which combines all the important elements of these viewpoints together. So first, it is necessary to foreground transition as a filter lens through which to look afresh at the preceding five dimensions collectively. Focusing on the idea of transition helps us to understand the students' learning experience as a journey developing over time and undergoing different and particular dimensions of challenges. However, this idea does not suffice to offer an integrated perspective, because the transitional lens only serves to connect the preceding five dimensions mechanically.

Therefore it is necessary to find a more powerful visual device to encompass all their key components. This section will therefore review an emerging school of theories about learning – the perspective of academic literacy practices. This perspective draws on the studies discussed above. However, the concept of academic literacy

practices is not adopted in its early and well-researched form. It is taken as an enlarged and broadened conception, which will be introduced as the lens of ‘Master’s Literacies’.

### *2.7.1 Transitions*

Although transition studies of the experiences of Chinese students in the UK are not new, most of them focus on transitions from school to undergraduate level (Tian and Lowe, 2012; for example Gu et al., 2010) or on transitions from taking the first half of the undergraduate programmes in China to continuing the same programmes in the UK (for example, Wang et al., 2012; Cross and Hitchcock, 2007). Such reviews of transitional experiences about the Chinese students usually adopt an inter-culture perspective.

#### *2.7.1.2 U-curve model*

Early literature about international students usually focuses on cultural discontinuity and cultural differences using the concept of ‘culture shock’. Most researchers in this group conceive of culture shock as a ‘trigger’ to produce subsequent negative disorientation emotions, such as anxiety and stress caused by changes of living environment from the familiar set of ‘signs and symbols of social intercourse’ in the home culture (Oberg, 1954, p.1) to the unfamiliar kinds of cultural cues in the host culture (Spradley and Phillips, 1972).

In this first group of studies researching transition, the most frequently cited work is Lysgaard’s U-curve model (1955), which has been followed and developed by Oberg’s four stages – *honeymoon* with first excitement upon arrival at a new context, *crisis* caused by culture shock, *recovery* from cross-culture stress, *adjustment* in the new context (1960); and Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s W-curve model with regard to reverse culture shock (1963). According to the U-curve Model, cultural shock is a common phenomenon which normally occurs at the second stage of an overseas journey after the ‘honeymoon’ period (Oberg, 1960). Although these theories were advanced more than 50 years ago, they are really important to the current research.

This is because reviewing the literature, these early theories are still influential.

Several recent studies have elaborated the U-curve model (Currie, 2007; Brown and Holloway, 2008; Zhao and Bourne, 2011) and given particular attention to Chinese MBA students in the UK. Currie's findings (2007) support the U-curve Model that the initial excitement on Chinese students' arrival in their new surroundings are subsequently overwhelmed by negative culture shock. Nonetheless, the author revises the traditional U-curve Model to acknowledge that culture shock is not a universal phenomenon: degrees of accommodation vary across individuals. In sharp contrast, Zhao and Bourne's mixed-method longitudinal research (2011) demonstrates that there is no 'honeymoon' stage: both the UK teachers and MBA students suffer frustration from the outset. Brown and Holloway (2008) take a similar view, while also suggesting that culture shock is not merely an east-west cultural phenomenon, but can also be experienced by international students from the European countries.

Common criticisms of the U-curve Model are that it is based on a dearth of empirical support (Church, 1982), limited dimensional stages of adjustments, over-generalisation with less attention to individual variations (Thomoas and Harrell, 1994), and mechanically linear patterning (Gao and Gudykunst, 1990). Moreover, most of the theories are not specifically located in an academic context, let alone that of higher education, and it has proved difficult to measure and gauge the key notion of culture shock. Consequently, what is contended is hypothetical rather than empirically validated. Additionally, this model emphasises cross-cultural boundaries (Gu et al. 2010), rather than viewing different cultures of equal values and sharing similarities as well as differences. It may suggest a tendency of cultural obedience and a pathological way to judge some international students as the 'reduced-other' (Grimshaw, 2007). Consequently, 'despite its popular and intuitive appeal, the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment should be rejected' (Ward et al., 1998, p.290).

### 2.7.1.3 *The culture learning model*

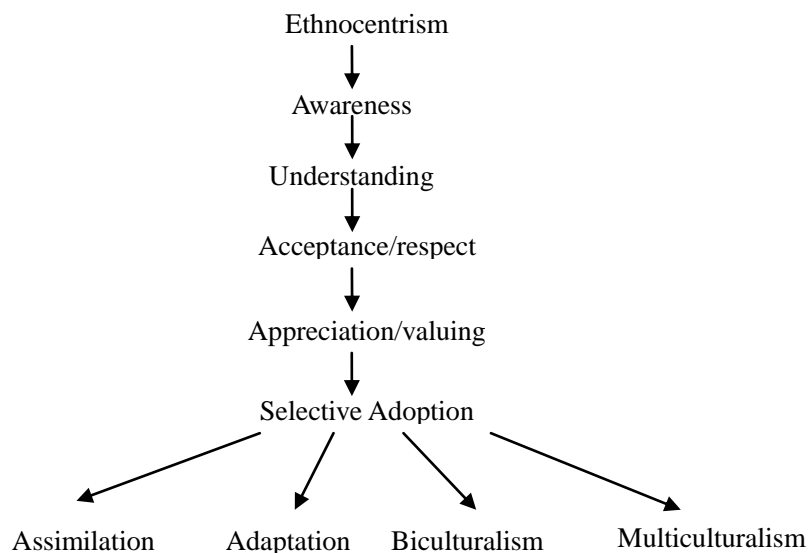
An alternative model to the U-curve is the culture learning model. According to Anderson (1994) and Brown and Holloway (2008), this model conceives of adaptation as a learning process by international students' increasing knowledge of and competence coping with the new sociocultural norms and values with respect to both the perceptual rules (to interpret the new environment) and behaviour rules (to orientate the international students themselves within this new environment). One research perspective represented within this mode focuses on behavioral learning (for example, Triandis, 1980; Chuang et al., 2000) and sees transition or adaptation as learning social skills practised by trial and error (Anderson, 1994; Brown and Holloway, 2008). A somewhat different perspective views culture learning as intercultural communication (for example, Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963; Scollon and Scollon, 2001; Furnham and Bochner, 1986). Scollon furthermore sees students' intercultural communication as interdiscursive communication in a new discourse community (Scollon, 1995), seeing discourse as a social practice (Scollon, 1999). Applied to the current research, this would suggest that examining Chinese students' Master's transitions may help in probing their experiences and challenges with academic literacy acquisition.

### 2.7.1.4 *Pusch's cross-cultural learning continuum*

A third group of transition studies of researchers see cultural transitions as a psychological journey of attitudes towards 'the other' cultures, from the margins to the centers of the second culture, and from an attitude of repelling or avoidance to appreciation or respect (for example, Pusch, 1979, reported in Wan, 1999; Bennett, 1986).

Pusch's continuum model is shown in Figure 2.6. Applied to Chinese students coming to a UK university, it suggests they would encounter a set of culture experiences which they never knew or never experienced before (*ethnocentrism*). Then students would go through '*awareness*' of others – a critical stage determining their transitions either in a relatively smooth way or in a difficult way. Chinese

students might perceive ‘the western kind’ as ‘an aggressive enemy/threat’ to take their home cultural identity away, and may struggle more to maintain a sense of ‘cultural security’ by refusing to change or respond to the needs of living and learning in the UK than the students who think ‘the others’ as ‘an interesting friend’



**Figure 2.6 Pusch’s continuum (Wan 1999, p 5)**

good for personal growth. Once an *understanding* of the merits and drawbacks of the new kinds of cultural values and norms takes root, Chinese learners perhaps have a greater readiness to *accept* and to *respect* without bias and critiques. For the new patterns of behaviour which they really *appreciate*, they would *adopt/re-invest* in their real life and learning experiences in the UK. The transitional journey may culminate in the students’ *assimilation* (absorption into the new cultural environment), *adaptation* (not necessarily absorption, but responding to the new environment appropriately), *biculturalism* (coping with the two cultures confidently), and *multiculturalism* (coping with the multiple cultures confidently without sense of anxiety and defensiveness).

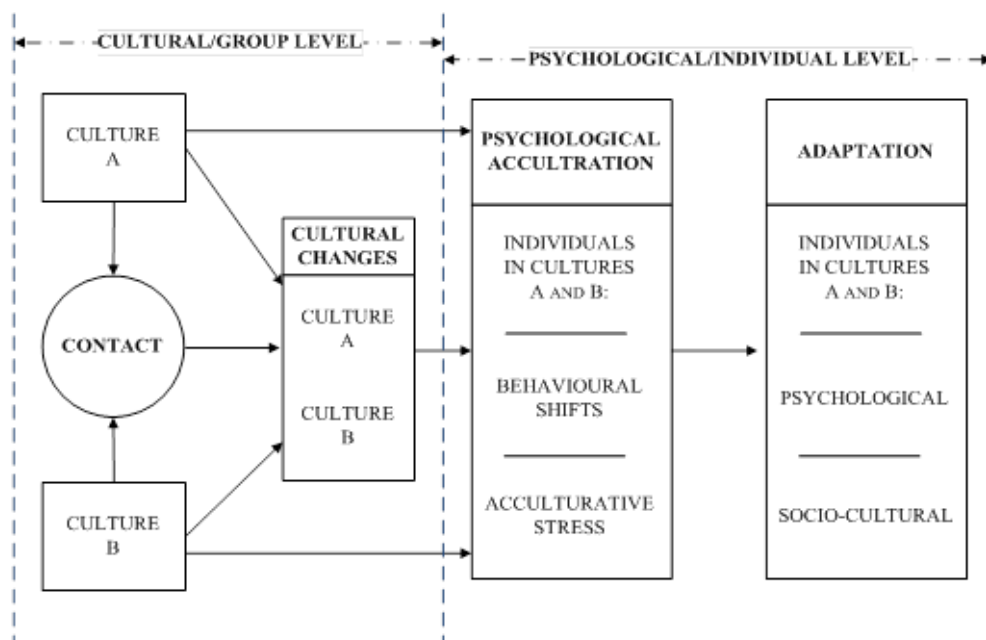
While a notable advantage of Pusch’s model is its focus on psychological factors, these should not be seen as static but rather as a dynamic movement going upward and downward (Kim, 2008). Students’ coping strategies and the new context’s mediating functions also need to be taken into account.



### *2.7.1.5 Berry's acculturation model*

Berry's acculturation model helps to address these limitations. The first of his three key concepts, 'acculturation', not only suggests that adjustments have two dimensions at the individual level – psychological adjustment and socio-cultural adjustment – but also indicates that the nature of adaptation at the level of two culture groups is reciprocal (Ward and Kennedy, 1999). In Berry's perception (2005), while 'adaptation' and 'accommodation' suggest a limited time phase, 'acculturation' is a longer-term process of adaptation.

Berry's second key concept, 'acculturation stress', is used instead of culture shock which Berry views as suggesting a sense of obedience to the dominant cultural power, while also implying that intercultural contact is a negative trigger for potential challenges and difficulties (Berry, 1997). In contrast, 'acculturation stress' suggests that intercultural encounter is an equal and dynamic interplay, and can lead to positive personal achievement with the assistance of appropriate coping strategies. Berry's concept of 'acculturation stress' has begun to be used in research about the Chinese students' overseas journey (for example, Tian and Lowe, 2012; Brown and Holloway, 2008; and in the work of Gu and Schweisfurth, 2006, and Gu, 2009 on 'intercultural stress'), and has a valuable contribution to make to the present research, suggesting that acculturation stress may be caused by different aspects of living and learning in the UK, (for example teaching-learning across pedagogical cultures, languages, subjects and levels of studies) and that such stresses may happen and impact on students' learning experiences at various stages of learning journeys. This is evident in Figure 2.7, taken from Berry (2005), which suggests that during the acculturation process, at the group level, changes or shifts may happen in either the home culture or the host culture or both cultures according to variations brought in by individuals and contexts. At the individual level, intercultural encounters may result in shifts at the initial stage of the journey as behavioral shifts and acculturation stress then end up by adaptation in both the psychological domain and the socio-cultural domain. If behavioral shifts and



**Figure 2.7 Berry's acculturation model (Berry, 2005, p.703)**

acculturative stress are coped with successfully – and such coping strategies can come from students' themselves or their UK teachers – long term adaptation will occur in both psychological and socio-cultural dimensions.

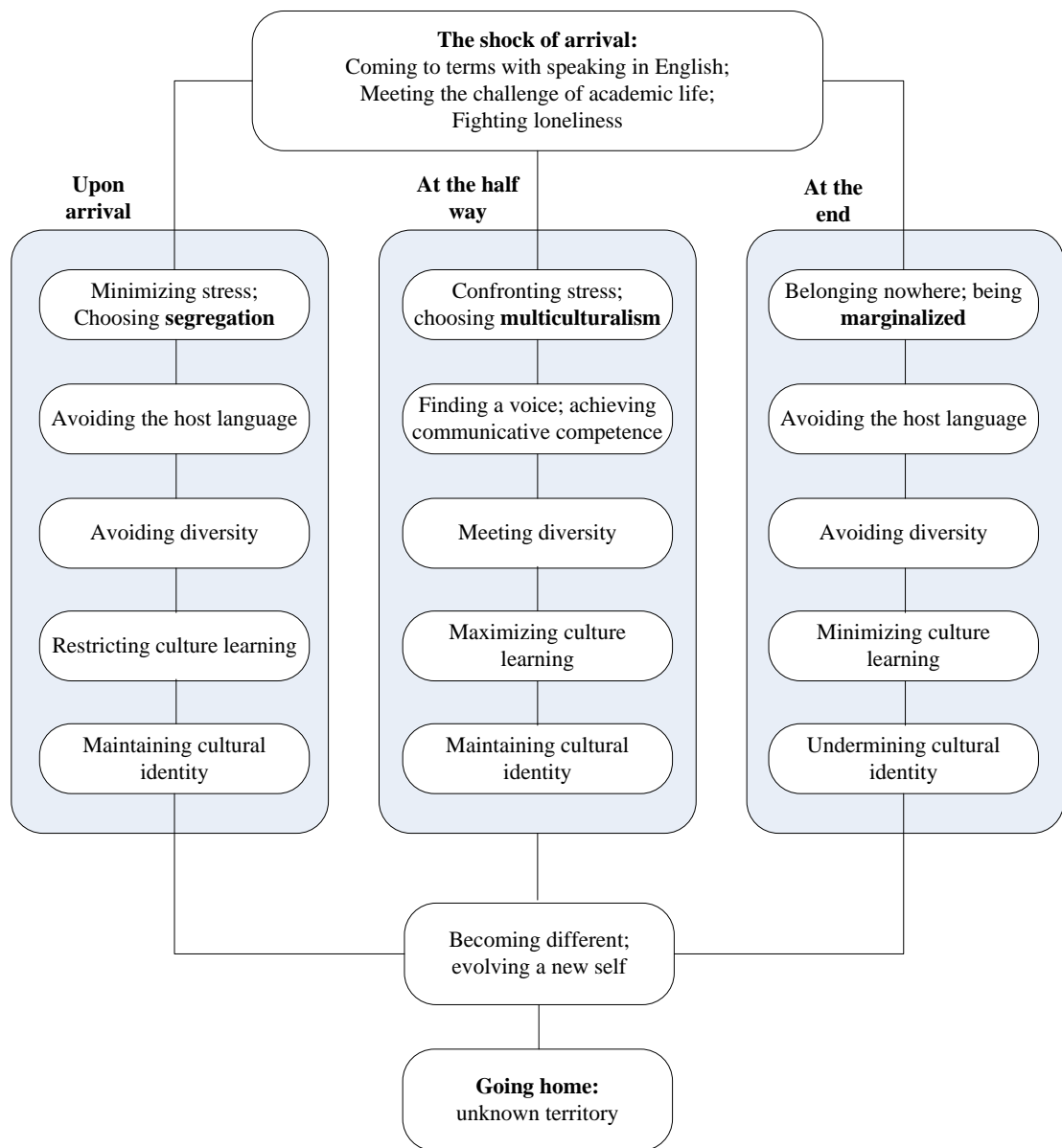
Berry's acculturation model undeniably has limitations, the most important of which, in the present context, is that although it has been applied to a wide range of acculturative individuals, for example immigrants, refugees, sojourn and ethnic groups (Berry, 2005; Berry et al., 1987), its applicability to academic settings has yet to be empirically tested.

However, it offers a valuable benchmark because it makes a shift from the linear patterning characteristic of the U-curve Model and, in identifying two adjustment dimensions, suggests the complexities of adjustment processes. The value of Berry's model is also apparent from an increasing number of studies in the UK which have yielded important insights. For example, it has been found that the more superficial the accommodation the Chinese students experience (and the less competence they gain), the more likely they are to have feelings of isolation, less confidence, less sense of achievement, alienation and marginalisation. In addition, the teaching-learning quality in the UK may be improved if the Chinese students'

and their UK teachers' coping strategies match up perfectly (Currie, 2007; Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009, Huang, 2005; McClure, 2007; Gu et.al, 2010; Wang et al., 2012; Zhao and Bourne, 2012). Theoretically, too, Berry's model is insightful in the subsequent development of transition research, because it has been cited and re-constructed to produce new theories about the Chinese students in the UK context.

For example, based on Berry's acculturation model, Brown and Holloway (2008) conducted a longitudinal one-year research project in a graduate school at a UK university. Relying on the interview data from thirteen international graduate students and observation data from the whole cohort of one hundred and fifty students, the findings show that acculturation stresses are caused by multi-facets of living and learning in the UK when they first meet the UK culture, for example, behaving in a British culturally-acceptable manner, 'language shock', weather discomfort, social assimilation with the British youth culture and academic study. Therefore, in contrast with the U-curve model which suggests a linear adjustment development, the findings demonstrate that students' adjustment represents as a curvilinear pattern. Meanwhile, this study supports Berry's model that there are two dimensions of inter-related adjustments: psychological stress impacts on students' socio-cultural adjustment. Finally, it confirms the culture learning model suggestion that the better communicative competences including language competence and social skills are, the easier and quicker students achieve adjustment.

Based on the qualitative data and Berry's model, Brown and Holloway created a new model (see Figure 2.8) which specifically focuses on international graduate students in a UK-context university. In the model there are three stages of students' overseas journey according to the time of overseas sojourn, namely at their arrival, during their sojourn and at the end of the journey. Upon their arrival, international students suffer the greatest stress in the UK due to cultural gap, language and academic demands and loneliness; which leads to psychological struggles to maintain old cultural values and norms by choosing segregation strategies (for example, avoiding interactions with people of other nationalities). As the contacts



**Figure 2.8 Brown and Holloway’s model of the adjustment process (reproduced from Brown and Holloway, 2008, p.245)**

with host country people by language communication and cultural learning behaviours increase, international students may be willing to respond to acculturation stress by multiculturalism strategies (for example, improving language competence and meeting diversity). While the initial frustration does not happen for every student, the final stage of apprehension over re-entry is a common experience to everyone during the last months of the sojourn to be ready for returning to their home countries.

Brown and Holloway's research needs more attention in the current research because it empirically supports and re-constructs Berry's model according to the real experience in the UK context. Moreover, it suggests that, compared to living in the UK, academic learning in the UK is a bigger challenge and more likely to result in international students' acculturation stress. However, although it focuses on international students, research participants are from thirteen unidentified different countries and unidentified disciplinary backgrounds. The fact that the range of individual variations is too wide and details about the methodology and its rationale are too vague makes the findings less reliable. Furthermore, it puts more emphasis on adjustment in social life than in the academic setting. Finally, even though two researchers have clearly stated that this continuum is plausible in investigating the international one-year Master's students in the UK, it deserves more attention. This is because of the distinctiveness of the UK Master's, that is, the limited length of programmes and intensive programme structures, which make the challenges more urgent to overcome. Therefore, the acculturation stress experienced by these students may be more serious, which may lead to more negative influences on their academic literacy practices in the UK.

#### *2.7.1.6 The third place*

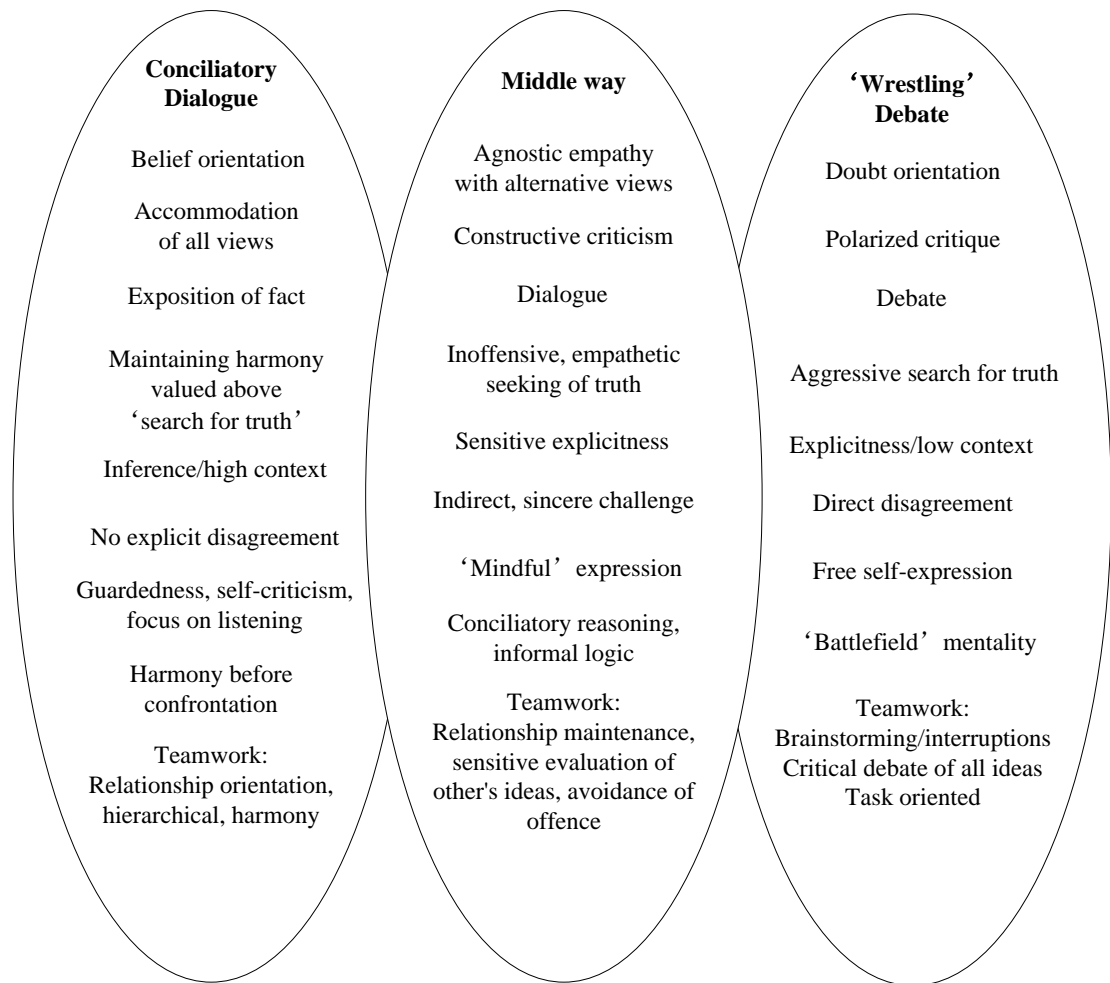
Unlike the early studies of transition, an increasing number of researchers have begun to realise the ambiguity of the transition, which they conclude means that adaptation and acculturation are never complete (Burnapp, 2006; Durkin, 2011). To put it another way, compared to finishing a full adjustment or acculturation, the Chinese students would be more likely to end up with the hybridity of synergising different and multiple epistemologies and cultural values at a 'place'. This place is imagined or created by those students, where they can locate themselves to explore and self-evolve without the feeling of alienation and without the need to get fully acculturated in the UK (Burnapp, 2006). Therefore, students' identities make shifts between 'in' and 'out' of the 'real place' – the academic community in the UK. The degrees of 'insideness' depend on the Chinese students' decisions on 'thus far no further' (Durkin, 2008a, p.24).

Although this model has been labeled differently by others – for example, ‘Imagined Communities’ called by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Kanno and Norton (2003); in Kramsch’s term of ‘the Third Place’ (1993); or ‘the Third Space’ proposed by Rutherford (1990) and Burnapp (2006); or in Duckin’s definition of ‘the Middle Way’ (2011) – it is a powerful one because it pays more attention to the Chinese students’ learning transitions in the UK.

Among them is the research conducted by Burnapp (2006), based on international Master’s students’ learning experiences in attending business studies seminars in the UK: they began understanding the new kind of learning values and what the legitimate knowledge was in the UK context and became aware of the need to change in order to get ‘insiderness’ in this new community. In the meantime, they would spontaneously compare the new kind of learning values and learning approaches to their previous kind in terms of strengths and limitations. As a result, they would select the most suitable kind or mix them as appropriate. In other words, they were less likely to complete full acculturation in the new context. However, it does not mean that the research participants did not learn to adapt and change to the academic context in the UK. Transitions happened when their identities shifted and their personal growth was developed by understanding and appreciation of the new kind of academic values in the UK. The findings are in line with Pusch’s continuum (1979) that students experience transitions by increasing openness of psychological sensitivity towards ‘the others’. However, this research is empirically weak, because it lacks detailed discussion about methodology: it only introduces the data collection methods – interview and document analysis – but neglects the details about the research participants (for example who they are and how many they are). The root reason may be because it only aims to offer some practical observations to improve EAP courses specific to the future business school students. Although the article’s interview extracts show that the participants include a Chinese student and a French student, the numbers and details of other participants are not identified.

Durkin’s studies (2008b, 2011) which investigate the East Asian students (mostly the

learners from China) in the UK context, also demonstrate that there is no end-point of acculturation. She makes a model to describe an interesting path which the East Asian students adopt in the class debates. According to Figure 2.9, while doing critical argumentation, the East Asian students behave neither like their UK peers in a



**Figure 2.9 The Middle Way (Durkin, 2008b, p.41)**

combative way but nor do they take the conciliatory way characterised by their original cultural values. They conduct argumentative dialogues in a less confrontational way. In other words, while they carry out debates to seek knowledge as their UK peers do, they also care about peers' 'face problems'. Nevertheless, although Durkin's study (2008b) is theoretically rich, like Burnapp's research (2008), it is still empirically weak due to lack of identification concerning the research participants' disciplinary programmes.

### *2.7.1.7 Two-way adaptation*

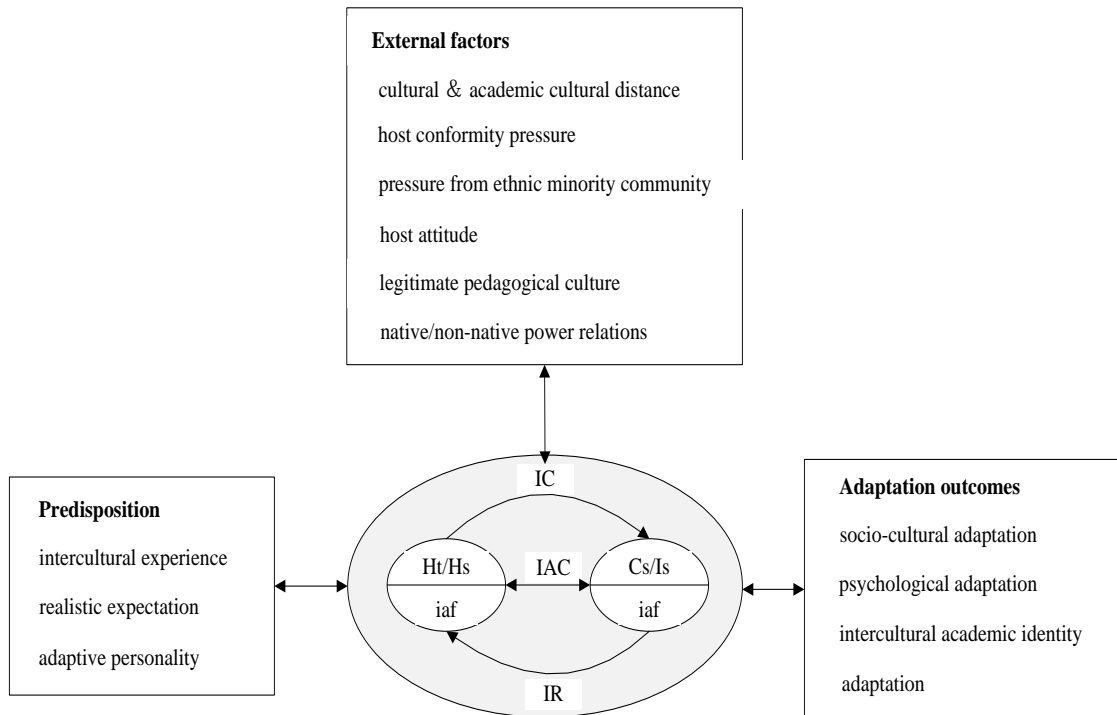
While researchers focus on the adaptation and acculturation from the Chinese students' perspective, more and more researchers realise that in the UK context there is absolutely no single way adaptation (for example, Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Currie, 2007; Cross and Hitchcock, 2007; Zhao and Bourne, 2011). There is always a two-way adaptation or process happening on both the UK group (either teachers or the UK students or both) and the Chinese students. So during their learning journey, both the UK teacher and the Chinese students should contribute to minimize 'cultural asymmetry' 'in a dialogic fashion' (Currie, 2007, p.552). Although the current research pays little attention to the UK teachers' adaptation to the Chinese learners, it is still of importance because this two-way perspective has implications for how the Chinese students' learning transitions in Master's programmes could be supported by the teachers' scaffolding roles.

Zhao and Bourne (2011) advocate building up mutual adaptation and understanding between the UK teachers and MBA international students in their longitudinal research in 2003/04. Relying on qualitative data, they maintain that since the initial stage of the MBA programme learning, both UK teachers and international students begin suffering frustration due to unfamiliarity with each other. However, neither side seems willing or able to move their position. Consequently, the expectations gap becomes enlarged from the second to the fourth months in the Master's journey. It undeniably results in more difficulties for the international students when they try to comprehend the UK-situated discourse norms and legitimate pedagogy cultures in classroom interactions. Although being challenged by the gap between different pedagogical cultures, two-way adaptation is eventually realised at the end of the programme, because both the international students and the UK teachers begin to adopt integration coping strategies. It supports Berry's acculturation model (2005) (shown in Figure 2.7 on page 63) which suggests that both the teachers and the students should match up to each other's coping strategies. If both sides take separation strategies, transitions would be predicted to deteriorate. If either side takes integration strategies, then the transition would be impacted negatively. Two-way adaptation and students' transitions would be realised only if both sides



take integration strategies.

Zhao and Bourne’s model about two-way intercultural adaptation process is notable, because it provides insights for analyzing the data for the current research. According to Figure 2.10, seen from the students’ position, students’ adaptation progress and transitional journey are impacted by three factors. Firstly,



Ht/Hs: Host teachers/Host students; Cs/Is: Chinese students/international students; IC: Intercultural Communication; IR: Intercultural Relationship; IAC: Intercultural Adaptation Competence; iaf: Individual’s affective factors.

**Figure 2.10 Reproduced from Zhao and Bourne’s model of the two-way intercultural adaptation process (2012, p.267)**

international students bring their predisposition to the UK context as an internal input and encounter the new kind of legitimate pedagogical culture as an external input. Secondly, UK teachers scaffold their students’ learning transitions by intercultural communications and intercultural relationships. Thirdly, international students’ intercultural adaptation competence plays the most important role, which is defined as students’ individual competences of meta-cognitive, cognitive and social skills. Consequently, compared to the above studies, this model is of the most importance, because it focuses on the literacy requirements for MBA international students in the

UK. In other words, it focuses attention on students' transitions in learning academic literacies in the UK-based and MBA-featured contexts.

### *2.7.2 Masters' Literacies*

While the previously discussed concept of transition gathers together the five dimensions of learning mechanically (namely, learning at the Master's level, learning across cultures, learning across languages, and learning across subjects), this concept does not function as an integrated and comprehensive perspective. However, Master's Literacies, which is discussed in this section, can fulfill that function.

#### *2.7.2.1 Literacy and literacies: the shift from an individual to a sociocultural perspective*

'Literacy' is a contested term and a simple definition has proved to be elusive. This is because this concept is historically patterned by our world views and represents different meanings to different people at different time (Gee, 1990; Besnier and Street, 1994; Baynham, 1995; Street, 2003). Moreover, Heath (1982) also acknowledges the difficulty in demystifying the notion of literacy, because 'the nature of oral and written language and the interplay between them is ever shifting, and these changes both respond to and create shifts in the individual and societal meanings of literacy' (p.XVI).

The conceptualisation of literacy has undergone a transformation from the traditional, individualistic view to a view that emphasises how literacy is socially defined and sustained. This has been well captured by Gee:

The traditional view of literacy as the ability to read and write rips literacy out of its sociocultural contexts and treats it as an asocial cognitive skill with little or nothing to do with human relationships. (Gee, 1990, p.23)

Therefore, literacy as a term is now no longer viewed as a unitary phenomenon, but rather is seen as covering a varied and complex range of social and cultural practices. For example, in the 1990s Ivanic (1997) regarded this term, in her role as a post-modernistic linguist, as reading and writing within socio-cultural and personal

patterned discourses. More recently, in the 2000s, Street (2003) viewed it as a much more complex term which encompasses knowledge, identity and ways of being: ‘the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being’ (p.77-78).

Nonetheless, the concept of literacy is even wider than these developing definitions suggest. It includes all practices patterned by social relationships as well as speaking and listening (Carson et al., 1992). Therefore instead of discussing it in terms of literate modes, Gee introduces the term ‘discourse’ to indicate the discursive nature of literacy practices. He conceptualises it as ‘the ability to behave in a way which marks one as an insider of a “Discourse” or “socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting”’ (Gee, 1990, p.43). Moreover, because of the shift to viewing literacy practices from a sociocultural perspective involving complex human relationships, especially the inclusion of numeracy (for example mathematics) in definitions, and because of the emergence of multimedia texts (for example screen and verbal texts on televisions and radios), the Australian Literacy and Language Policy Group provided a definition which captured such complexities:

The ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society. It also includes the recognition and use of numbers and basic mathematical signs and symbols. Literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening, reading, viewing, writing and critical thinking. (Cairney, 1995, p.ix)

As an indication of this move to a broader definition, many authors have chosen to use the expression ‘literacies’. This is because this plural phrase recognises that there are multiple literacies, that literacy is crucial to much social activity and that it is interconnected with other cultural practices and specific contexts. In addition, according to Boughey (2006), ‘literacies’ stands for various kinds of and genres of texts (for example the textual literacies or the symbolic literacies), which also broadens this notion widely.

### *2.7.2.2 Academic literacies*

Literacies have also become important in the academic context. Early research on academic literacies reflects and parallels the research of the ‘New Literacy Studies’ (for example, Street, 1984; Baynham, 1995).

Just as early definitions of literacy focused only on reading and writing, so early definitions of academic literacies had an equally narrow focus (for example Lea and Street’s conceptualisation, 1998), although they include reference to the cultural and contextual aspects of academic literacies. However, just as there has been a shift to wider conceptualisations:

In recent years, the term “academic literacy” has come to be applied to the complex set of skills (not necessarily only those relating to the mastery of reading and writing)... (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p.4)

Similarly, in Normazidah et al. (2012), Koo (2008) re-defined academic literacy in a way which moves it beyond a narrow focus on reading and writing to capture thinking, meaning creation and the importance of oral transactions in learning:

...the various ways of meaning-making in terms of thinking, ways of meaning, reading, speaking, listening and writing which are valued in the academic setting... (p.2)

### *2.7.2.3 Researching academic literacy practices in Higher Education*

Much of the literature has focused on exploring academic literacies at undergraduate level. Therefore, because the concept of Masters’ Literacies is a research gap, it is worthwhile researching the previous studies about academic literacy practices in higher education in a more general sense.

According to Besnier and Street (1994), literacy practices are distinctive because of different contexts of use. There has been a considerable amount of research into academic literacy practices in Higher Education and different theoretic perspectives have emerged.

There have been distinct theoretical perspectives used to research students’ academic

literacy practices at higher education: literacy practices as normative processes or as social practices. Advocates of the first perspective are Lea and Street (1998). They categorised three models to research student writing: firstly from the study skills model, which requires students to write technically and in instrumentally skilled ways; to the academic socialisation model, which requires students to interpret learning tasks in the local culture; then to their favoured model – the academic literacies model which requires students to write with consideration of the discourses and power impacted by the contested nature of their different epistemologies and ideologies. Those researchers who follow the academic literacies model (Haggis calls them ‘academics-as-discourse-analysts’, 2009, p.3) focus on the power relationships between the dominant discourses and students’ performances, and writing using appropriate discourses (Haggis, 2009, p.3). According to Haggis (2009), these works examine how students’ writing is modeled by the dominant academic norms and conventions and how their literacy practices represent these changes. Or to use Morita’s term (2004), it is a product-orientated research perspective, which focuses on what learners need to know to participate fully in a specific academic community.

In contrast, another group of researchers viewed students’ literacy practices as social practices experienced by students (for example Lillis, 2001; Morita, 2004; Hounsell and Anderson, 2005). Haggis calls this sociological perspective the ‘analysts-of-social-formation’ perspective which emphasises the construct of understanding learning at universities (Haggis, 2009, p.3). In Morita’s study (2004), it is termed the ‘process-orientated perspective’ to explore novices’ learning process when they socialise into context-situated academic discourses. The latter perspective should be also noted, because it focuses on students’ ‘experience of learning’ in order that teachers could empathetically understand and improve their teaching and the students’ learning experiences (from Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle’s point of view, 1997).

While these two alternative perspectives have strengths in examining students’ learning at universities, they also have weaknesses. For example, even though the

former perspective allows a clear focus in students' development regarding written texts, it lacks a fruitful exploration of other modes of literacies – listening and speaking verbal texts. Moreover, it does not allow the audience to hear the students' voices (Haggis, 2009). Although the sociological perspective may be able to let the audience feel 'students' experience as witnesses', it may over-emphasise individual aspects, for example personal and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, it does not offer judgments but rather only describes students' experiences.

Having taken the strengths and limitations of each of these two perspectives into account, the current study will adopt a third perspective to investigate the Chinese students' Masters' Literacies: it will neither see these alternatives as exclusive to each other nor see them as perfectly compatible. The approach adopted in the present research aims to combine two perspectives in a reasonable way. While paying attention to the research on the participant's journey of Masters' Literacies patterned by their individual attributes (such as language competences, cultural underpinnings, disciplinary differences) and bringing their voices to the fore, it will also offer some insights into how they are modelled by teachers' requirements in terms of the demands of written assignments. To put this another way, drawing on prior literature discussing academic literacy practices in a general sense, Masters' Literacies in the current research will view learning as context-situated experiences. To enter a specific context, Chinese students would have to experience a dynamic transformation changing from the role of apprentice to an expert with the bond of changing shared practices situated in changing socio-cultural communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This identity transformation would require students to fully participate, to behave in 'ways of belonging' (to use Lave's and Wenger's term, 1991) and 'ways of being' (Gee, 1996), and to demonstrate 'ways of thinking' in the academic discourse communities (in McCune and Hounsell's theory, 2005). Correspondingly, through increasing interactions with more experienced community members, students would be not only be expected to acquire knowledge and capability of academic literacies, but also to have fully socialised into a socio-cultural dimension in a given academic discourse community.

However, according to Leki (2001) and Morita (2004), degrees of legitimacy that different learners can be granted can only depend on what is the dominant power prevailing within the communities of practice. In other words, individuals' degree of expertise and authority to speak in the given discourse community depends on how the power relations are negotiated.

For the Chinese Master's students, entering a new academic community and avoiding marginality is unlikely to be easy, because of a potential gap or a power relationship between their old identity/role and literacies constructed in their previous learning experiences in China and the new identity/role and Masters' Literacies situated at a higher level of study (Master's level), a different subject, the UK-contextualised cultural pedagogies and the medium of English.

#### *2.7.2.4 Masters' Literacies*

There is also a debate about whether the term 'academic literacy' is appropriate for school-based context or should be restricted to the university-level context. While Gee (2004) and Torgesen et al. (2007) claim that academic literacy could embrace all kinds of literacy practices in education, regardless of whether it is school-based or university-based, other key writers insist that academic literacies do not exist at both levels. This is because expertise in academic literacies in Higher Education should demonstrate:

... [abilities] to negotiate three distinct worlds of discourse: the domain content world of logically-related truths, the narrated world of everyday experience, and the rhetorical world of abstract authorial conversation. (Geisler, 1992, p.44)

Taking into account the need to explicitly distinguish academic literacies related to different levels of studies, in the current study, 'Masters' Literacies' is used to specifically indicate the academic literacies and academic literacy practices required at Master's level. This newly-developed concept contains all teaching-learning experiences and mainly students' learning activities, involved in the postgraduate learning journey within specific subjects and socio-cultural underpinnings which could be seen as social practices to acquire and use academic literacies (such as

listening, speaking, reading and writing) but also refers to knowledge constructed by the cognitive process of meaning making (such as interpretations of teaching contexts and ways of thinking).

### Master's Literacies situated at Master's level

The concept of 'Masters' Literacies' fills a gap between undergraduate and postgraduate levels of studies which exists between the learning identity demanded at undergraduate level and the kind required of Master's students (Tobbell et al., 2010). Although Tobbell and his colleagues' research participants (2010) included Master's students and PhD students, this gap exists for all research participants: postgraduate students hesitated to take individual autonomy for learning and to input critical contributions to the knowledge repertoire. Their evidence revealed the reason why the students resisted taking responsibility for their own learning: the dictates of teacher's practices were not able to facilitate students' full participation, rather than these students lacking capability for doing so (Tobbell et al., 2010).

Besides the tension in terms of the required independent learning at Master's level, the new novices still face an intellectual challenge which is created by the gap in requirements between undergraduate and Master's learning. According to Stierer (2000), whose qualitative research investigated MA in Education students' literacy practices, while writing Master's essays the students attempted to connect their prior writing experiences with their new writing tasks. However, although some of them were able to find relevance, Master's writing tasks were distinguished by a higher level of generic writing skills.

### Masters' Literacies situated across cultures

In the section **2.4 Learning across Cultures**, it was noted that using either the 'large culture' approach to contrasting Western-Chinese national cultures, or the 'small culture' approach to identifying sub-cultural similarities, is unhelpful. This is because during communication, both the message transmitter and receiver code and encode meanings according to their respective previous large and small cultural backgrounds and the contexts where the communication is happening. These



different cultures often embody power relationships that impact on the message transmission and reception (Tian and Lowe, 2012). The message is therefore encoded in a particular way through the negotiations of discourse power relationships.

From a different cultural perspective, being novices in a new academic community in the UK, Chinese students apparently become a minority group of discourse communicators compared to their UK teachers and peers. The gap/power relationship therefore becomes evident between Chinese students' previous cultural backgrounds and UK-featured cultures and assumptions (Currie, 2007; Zhao and Bourne, 2011). More particularly, there is a gap between the academic discourse community in China and that in the UK with regard to what the appropriate kind of literacies and literacy practices are.

Chinese students' challenges are highlighted when they try to cope with this gap. This has been demonstrated by a volume of literature which concludes that Chinese students are confused '[by what] are perceived and recognised as legitimate' in the western academic context (Bourdieu, 1985, p.724). For example, Chen and Bennett (2012) found that Chinese students were not satisfied with their learning experiences in Australia because they doubted the legitimacy of the knowledge they gained. Moreover, the findings of Tian and Lowe (2012) suggest that Chinese Master's students in the UK are confused about 'what good work is' and thus they are unable to understand their UK teachers' feedback. Last but not the least, Zhao and Bourne's empirical study (2011) demonstrates that the gap between legitimate pedagogical cultures damages the relationship between Chinese students and their UK teachers and makes their interactions less effective.

Acknowledging the problem that an unfamiliar UK-characterised pedagogical culture makes Chinese students feel marginalised in UK classrooms, researchers advocate the use of 'multiple literacies' (Gee, 1996; Zhao and Bourne, 2011). Because they are novices in the UK academic community, Chinese students' literacy practices are different from the mainstream (Gee, 1996). The UK teachers' awareness of

multiple literacies helps to ensure that the minority Chinese students' voices are heard and their literacy practices are recognised (Zhao and Bourne, 2011). In other words, to cope with the gap/power relationship in Chinese-British pedagogical cultures, teachers are advised to function in a mediating role to encourage the Chinese students to fully engage in the UK academic discourse community (Currie, 2007).

### Masters' Literacies situated at the disciplinary community

In the section **2.6 Learning across Disciplines**, it was noted that when people come to do a Master's degree in the UK they not only have to learn a body of content knowledge, they also have to learn a body of academic literacy practices situated within a given subject. There has been a rich pool of articles arguing that the subject matter brings with it a set of conventions. For example, Hussey and Smith suggest that learning in a subject encompasses a process of 'identifying, understanding and assimilating a complex range of assumptions, behaviors and practices' as well as 'dialects, discourse forms and ways of thinking' (Hussey and Smith, 2010, p.159). Therefore, in order to adopt relevant academic literacy practices, according to Lea and Street (2006), students were expected to 'switch their writing styles and genres between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of literacy practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes' (Lea and Street, 2006, p368). However, it becomes problematic if students are not familiar with academic conventions and discourses in particular communities, because there is a gap between the experts' literacy practices and novices' literacy practices within a given subject.

This gap between novices' and experts' literacy practices has been discussed fully in the section **Learning across Disciplines**, where Hounsell (1987) found there was a gap between the students' interpretation of teachers' feedback and what their teachers' real intentions were. In a similar vein, Lea and Street (1998) explicated clearly about difficulty with closing this gap:

...disciplinary history had a clear influence on staff conceptualisations and representations of what were the most important elements to look for in students' writing at both levels, although the epistemological and methodological issues that

underlay them were often expressed through the surface features and components of 'writing' in itself...that led to difficulties for students not yet acquainted with the disciplinary underpinnings of faculty feedback... (Lea and Street, 1998, p 162)

Furthermore, in addition to the challenges students faced with new subject matter, Lea and Street (1998) suggested two additional reasons for the difficulties students encountered with essay writing. These focused on contrasting ideologies and epistemologies where, within a specific subject, differences between each course module or even individual lecturers may require students to bear in mind and to make a shift in terms of conceptualising essay-writing across courses and lecturers. This argument is congruent with what Bizzell (2009) suggests. This is because different presumptions of the nature of essay-writing bring a different set of epistemological presuppositions regarding how to perceive the nature of knowledge and learning (Lea and Street, 1998). However, teachers did not explicitly state how far their students' writing structure and argument failed to satisfy the writing requirement, although they could distinguish between good or bad essay writing.

Although Lea and Street (1998) extended their discussion to explore 'the gap' in the broader context of institution, they omitted any discussion of it at a subject level. In other words, they did not attempt to find out the differences – the gaps – across disciplines. Although they collected data from lecturers and students who were from subjects within the social sciences, natural sciences and humanities at two universities, using unstructured interviews, contrasting perspectives and conceptualisations were probed only in a limited way in seeking the perspectives of teachers and students. Because of that lack of detailed and appropriate exploration of the differences or 'the gaps' between subjects, the criteria for selecting the research participants from different knowledge backgrounds seemed to be meaningless. There are many variations in the extent of these gaps across different subject areas. For example, when students are using Masters' Literacies, this gap may be smaller in the subject of natural sciences than social sciences and humanities. Because of the statistic-characterised nature of knowledge and requirements of exam questions in the subject of natural sciences, teachers' feedback may be more easily received and understood by their students because it is given in an 'international

language (numbers and symbols)'. In contrast, feedback containing more textual and descriptive expressions may widen this gap in subjects in the humanities and social sciences, especially for Chinese students whose first language is not English. Nevertheless, it is valuable to note that Lea and Street (1998) admitted that the programme handbooks were less likely to cater for the gaps. This was because, according to evidence, different course modules and individual teachers may increase the level of difficulty when students were required to shift their conceptualisations in the process of developing appropriate Masters' Literacies. Therefore it is perhaps unsurprising that, because of the different – and at times contradictory – understandings of the demands of academic Masters' Literacies, many Chinese students struggle to accept conventions around written discourses in their own work.

When discussing the core elements of writing essays within a given subject, Bizzell (2009) suggests that subject matter and the conventions of different disciplines were determinative when choosing appropriate ways to organise, because the disciplinary topics could only be interpreted accurately in the matching form of organisation (Bizzell, 2009). Moreover, when taking subject conventions into consideration, writers were enabled to identify what could be used as evidence and what evidence could be more persuasive. From three core elements, Bizzell (2009) focused more on the importance of evidence in an essay as the support and trigger to engender new conclusions by subject-convention-situated experiment design or research methodology. Another valuable argument that Bizzell proposed (2009) is that the appropriate development of the three core elements would facilitate students with judging arguments in a logical way. From this perspective, the barrier which impaired the writers' ability to develop critical arguments was not mainly the result of intellectual capabilities, but rather was due to insufficient appreciation of logical argument used in the social context. Bizzell's argument has helped to develop an understanding of the challenges a Chinese student faces when entering another discipline in the UK. Besides encountering a different disciplinary vocabulary, he/she may experience a journey with more complicated problems which may be caused by a different cluster of academic discourses and subject-characteristic conventions, for example, disciplinary writing organisation and disciplinary evidence

and argument. Influenced by Freire, Bizzell's argument (2009) is relevant to the current research in that the level of mastering subject matters not only relates to the performances of Masters' Literacies, especially essay-writing, but also associates to the ability of provoking critical thinking and developing argument logically.

### Masters' Literacies situated at language

In the section **2.5 Learning across language**, it was suggested that there is a gap between academic literacies and academic discourses and the general English required in everyday life:

...this language (disciplinary discourse) may not be the student's home language or indeed, that it may not be anyone's native tongue... (Bizzell, 2009, p.130)

Bizzell (2009) agrees with Bartholomae's view (1985) that academic discourse and 'standard English' deserve to be taught in a way which does not diminish students' critical consciousness, although he did not specify who was responsible for this teaching. She contrasted 'standard English' with 'common English', which was thought to be cognitively subordinated to the former kind. Bizzell claims that 'common English' is deemed as unhelpful for enhancing writers' credibility and making knowledge open to critical examination. In other words, writing by conventions does not constrain students' critical development. This is because, going further than Bartholomae (1985), Bizzell (2009) argues that to separate students' roles from the world of their knowing, using academic discourse in writing as a conventional practice encourages their creative development and generation of knowledge.

Compared with Bartholomae, Bizzell's position is more relevant to understanding Chinese students' Masters' Literacies in the present research. The reasons are two-fold. Firstly, Bizzell (2009) continued to take Bartholomae's perspective to stand in the role of student-writers. Both of these researchers provided an insightful discussion of the problems faced as they moved from being a basic writer to writing as an expert. Secondly, Bizzell (2009) took her exploration a step further. She did not merely distinguish the differences between 'common English' and 'standard

English' to show Chinese students what types of English they should pay more attention to when writing in a particular discipline; but also viewed academic conventions from another angle to solve the tension or students' confusion between conventional writing practices and the need to enhance creative awareness. Thirdly, Bizzell admitted that non-traditional students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, for example Chinese overseas students, may suffer more stress as a result of having to deploy different Masters' Literacies, especially when writing in the UK. Although it is challenging for them to have to learn and use the conventions of different disciplines, it is essential that they do if they are to succeed in academic writing in the UK. Chinese students must master them in order to share the consensus with their peers working in the same subject area. But it has to be acknowledged that Bizzell's article discusses these matters without offering any evidence. It is more like a review or a discussion than research supported by evidence.

#### Concluding comments

Based on the preceding discussion, Masters' Literacies offers an integrated perspective for investigating Chinese Master's students' literacy practices which are situated within a particular given discipline, cultural context, language and level.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### Research Design

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Two key concepts – ‘transitions’ and ‘Masters’ Literacies’ – were introduced in the preceding chapter. These concepts were central to the construction of the theoretical foundations for this study and, as the research progressed, their redevelopment.

The aim of this chapter is to describe and provide a rationale for the research design adopted for this study. It therefore presents the research questions, introduces and explains the value and limitations of the research perspectives considered in the research design process and describes the longitudinal dimension of the study. It goes on to describe the methodology of semi-structured interview as the main data gathering method, and discusses issues relating to data collection, analysis and reporting, for example, liaison with research participants, interview process and ethical concerns.

#### **3.2 Research Questions**

The main research question and three supplementary questions which underlie it were designed to capture particular dimensions of Chinese students’ experience of academic learning at Master’s level at a UK university, namely, learning across cultures and disciplinary communities and learning in English.

The main research question is:

How do Chinese-educated graduates experience academic literacy practices in their progression from a first degree in their homeland to a Master’s level programme in a UK university?

The three more specific, supplementary questions are:

(i) With this progression, what transitions do these students experience in pursuing their Master's programmes in the UK?

(ii) In what way do these transitions arise from and relate to differences between their literacy practices at undergraduate level in China and the Masters' Literacies required of them in the UK?

(iii) How are (i) and (ii) affected by features of the three specific Master's programmes investigated?

### **3.3 Research Design and Methods**

#### *3.3.1 The relative value of qualitative and quantitative approaches*

As outlined in the **Literature Review** chapter, a dominant group of studies about Chinese students' experiences of overseas learning is based on a qualitative research design. This is because quantitative research in comparison to qualitative research, as many have observed (Burns, 2000), has certain characteristics. Quantitative approaches gather large-scale data sets which produce findings which may be transferable to other research settings. However, although the current research collected data through both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the quantitative data was not critically evaluated in this study. The reasons for this decision are explained in the subsequent section.

There are three reasons why, for the purposes of this study, qualitative data took precedence over the quantitative data. First, considering that Master's learning is not as well-established as undergraduate learning, the present research was exploratory in nature. It was therefore difficult to tell in advance what kind of findings could be expected. A quantitative approach was not the appropriate choice for the main research design because survey questions and answers would have to have been specified in advance and would have been influenced by the researcher's pre-conceptions. For that reason, the quantitative phase of data collection was only



scheduled and conducted in July 2010 once all critical themes had been specified in a qualitative phase of data collection from September 2009 to June 2010. Second, it was important to capture the perceptions and feelings of research participants. A quantitative approach would not capture this data effectively. In contrast, qualitative research ontologically views human behaviour within social science research as being impacted upon by facets of the physical and mental world (Bryman, 1988). Whereas emotion-laden data is hard to measure only by quantitative coding and statistical counting, data gathered from a relatively small sample of selected interviewees could more authentically represent perceptions and feelings through textual descriptions and value interpretations. Third, as Silverman (2000) has pointed out, where research findings are solely quantitative, it can be hard to bridge a connection from the statistical statement to its underlying reasons. In certain circumstances, it can be impossible to investigate fully the relationship between reasons or indeed to link reasons to variables in a naturally occurring context. Although it could be reasonably assumed that students may encounter some difficulties, this assumption cannot be easily translated into a specific hypothesis, because precisely what difficulties and what level of transition Chinese Master's students encounter cannot be determined in advance. Any attempt to analyse and to explain Chinese students' challenges associated with the socio-cultural context is bound to raise questions concerning the role of culture and values which may be responsible for generating the difficulties. A qualitative approach is therefore more appropriate than a quantitative one to be able to probe these issues in-depth.

### *3.3.2 Grounded theory as a qualitative research approach*

Underlying this qualitative tradition, two perspectives became popular in previous studies aiming to explore students' higher education learning experiences in the UK: phenomenography – closely akin to grounded theory, as Richardson (1999) has observed – and ethnography (see for example, Prosser et al., 1994; Entwistle, 2005; Linder and Marshall, 2003). In the present research, grounded theory was adopted.

Similar in some perspectives to ethnography and phenomenography, grounded theory follows a qualitative approach in seeking to understand the individual's

experiences from their own perspectives rather than from the researcher's standpoint. Although not such a well-established methodology in student learning research, grounded theory was considered to have considerable potential in guiding and informing the present research. Although demanding in its challenges, it has much to offer, as Goulding (2005) has noted:

The rigours of the approach force the researcher to look beyond the superficial, to apply every possible interpretation before developing final concepts, and to demonstrate these concepts through explication and data supported evidence. (Goulding, 2005, p.297)

Moreover, for the purpose of exploring the complexities of Chinese students' transitional experiences, 'thick descriptions' of a small number of cases in greater detail (Geertz, 1973) were required in the current research. Indeed, as a research approach, grounded theory, it can be argued, has four characteristics which are of particular importance to the current research design: its exploratory mode of investigation, the constant comparative method of data analysis, its sensitivity to context and culture, and a commitment to scientific and scholarly rigour.

Firstly, given the limited number of previous studies of Chinese Master's students' experiences in the UK, as **Chapter 2** has noted, the present study calls for a relatively open and exploratory approach if it is to make a worthwhile and valid contribution to the field, and especially in relation to developing new conceptual insights. The constant comparative method of data analysis associated with grounded theory, with its back-and-forth interaction between data and emerging themes (Charmaz, 2014), has great potential to offer the necessary theoretical sensitivity.

Secondly, a recursive approach to analysis is highly desirable because the current research focuses on students' transitional experiences from one context to another as well as on their individual changes over time. In contrast to phenomenography, for example, which seems less well-suited to exploring shifts in time and settings, grounded theory's concern with contextualisation is indispensable:

Must grounded theory aim for the general level abstracted from empirical realities?  
No. Situating grounded theories in their social, historical, local and interactional

contexts strengthens them and supports making nuanced comparisons between data and among different studies. (Charmaz, 2014, p.332)

There is also its cultural sensitivity, for (like ethnography) grounded theory can accommodate an approach to interview questioning which has sufficient subtlety to 'fit the particular culture and specific research participants' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 330). This particular strength of grounded theory was also a factor in the choice of one-to-one interviews as my data collection method (as is further discussed below). Moreover, given the emerging evidence, as shown in the **Literature Review**, that the Chinese-UK socio-cultural gap can influence the Chinese students' transitional experiences in acquiring the academic literacies needed to succeed at Master's level, grounded theory seems promising in its potential for exploring the complexities of cultural influences across individuals.

Finally, compared to other qualitative research approaches, the methodological rigour of grounded theory is enhanced by its emergent approach to data selection and organisation, since it seeks to construct theories grounded in the data itself, rather than shaped by the researchers' pre-conceptions (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978; Mills et al., 2006). As Charmaz has noted, this entails acknowledging a distinctive role for the researcher:

Researcher construct their respective products from the fabric of the interactions, both witnessed and lived... Researchers are part of what they study, not separate from it... (Charmaz, 2014, p.320)

This observation has particular resonance with respect to my own role as the investigator in the present research, where, as a former Chinese Master's student in the UK, I was inescapably 'part of what I was studying, not separate from it'. However, that also made it important for me to take care with my dual role as a 'living' insider and 'witnessing' researcher because – in accordance with grounded theory, and in the interests of trustworthiness – I needed to manage 'a delicate balancing act between drawing on prior knowledge while keeping a fresh and open mind to new concepts as they emerge from the data' (Goulding, 2005, p.296).

### 3.3.3 Capturing longitudinal data

As mentioned in the **Literature Review**, transition is an important aspect of student experiences of learning. Within the area of the current research, several studies have employed a longitudinal research design. Table 3.1 summarises the key features of the approaches to capturing longitudinal data taken by ten of these studies.

Data gathering methods include observations, group meetings, document analyses, online/audio/email diary and interviews, and semi-structured interviews. Each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages as explained below.

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Level of study</b>	<b>Place of research</b>	<b>Data collection methods</b>
Tran (2008)	Master's level	Australia	Two phases of interviews.
Currie (2007)	MBA	UK	First phase: interview; Second phase: interview and observation.
Wang et al. (2012)	Undergraduate level	UK and China	Three phases of interview: before the Chinese students arrival in the UK; three months after the commencement of the academic year; and the end of second semester.
Tian and Lowe (2012)	Master's level	UK	Daily audio diary over one-year and four phases of semi-structured interview.
Skyrme (2007)	Undergraduate level	New Zealand	First stage: three phases of semi-structured interviews with each of participants in first semester; Second stage: follow-up interviews with some of participants at the end of the second semester.

**Table 3.1 Design of published longitudinal studies researching Chinese students' learning transitions (to be continued)**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Level of study</b>	<b>Place of research</b>	<b>Data collection methods</b>
Gu et al. (2010)	Undergraduate level	UK	First phase: questionnaire survey; Second phase: semi-structured interview, narrative interview, diaries and emails over time and focus group meeting; Third phase: a second questionnaire survey.
Tobbell et al. (2010)	Master's and doctoral levels	UK	From the students' perspective: One-to-one interview (at the beginning and the end of the academic year); Focus group (the eighth month of academic year); Longitudinal email diaries (over the academic year); Classroom observations (in mid-November and January). From the university and teachers' perspective: Documentary analysis of university and degree handbooks; One-to-one interviews with teachers.
Brown and Holloway (2008)	Master's level	UK	In-depth interviews and participant observation throughout one year.
Zhao and Bourne (2011)	MBA	UK	Longitudinal one-year data collection by observation, semi-structured interview and web-based survey.
Pilcher et al. (2011)	Master's level	UK	During students' dissertation, four phases of semi-structured interviews from the perspective of students and two phases of interviews from the perspective of their supervisors'

**Table 3.1 Design of published longitudinal studies researching Chinese students' learning transitions**

### *3.3.3.1 Observation*

Even though participant observation, the key data collection instrument in ethnography, has the advantage of being close to the subjects' natural settings, it has to be acknowledged that because of time constraints, this method of data gathering could not be the only one used for the type of research being undertaken in this study. Furthermore, although observations can make actions visible, it would be hard, without verbal questioning, to investigate how the subjects perceive the world.

### *3.3.3.2 Group discussion*

While collecting students' accounts during group discussion can save a lot of time, it also makes high logistical demands and, to some extent, arguments raised by fellow-participants in a group discussion may be mutually influenced and less varied. As noted in the **Literature Review**, Chinese students may have 'face problems' and be less likely to be critical in public of opinions expressed by others. Chinese participants' accounts may therefore be limited to a surface level because they would feel shamed by exposing their challenges or difficulties in front of others. However, if organised well, group discussion may properly encourage participants to become fully involved and the topic can be explored more thoroughly.

### *3.3.3.3 Documentary analysis*

Analysis of previous studies is valued in some studies, because it saves time and helps researchers collecting data to avoid and find solutions to challenges such as how to maintain research participation. However, as suggested in the **Literature Review**, some studies lack contemporary relevance. This is because of the rapidly evolving shift in attitudes to western perspectives and practices in China. Moreover, analysing university and degree handbooks provides limited scope for understanding students' learning experiences, because, as explained in the **Literature Review**, curriculum requirements are not usually explained explicitly in these and Chinese students may lack the knowledge required to understand culture-situated literacy requirements in the

UK.

#### *3.3.3.4 Online/audio/email diary*

This method of data collection can explore participants' authentic accounts, and like group discussion and document analyses, can save large amounts of time. Nevertheless, it does not provide an opportunity to observe research participants' physical languages and is less likely to provide follow-up questions.

#### *3.3.3.5 Interview and semi-structured interview*

Interviews were selected as the preferred data-gathering approach over other qualitative methods for the current study. This was not only because every previous study shown in Table 3.1 (on page 93-94) was conducted by interview or interview combined with other qualitative data collection methods. It was also because in the three research traditions – phenomenography, ethnography and grounded theory – interviews are a suitable data gathering method. Nonetheless, it did not mean that compared to other instruments, interview was necessary viewed as the best way to collect data for this study. It was worthwhile looking at alternative approaches for three reasons. First, collecting data by interview is very time-consuming, involving setting up the geographical location, interviewing, transcribing and reporting. Second, interview data, because it is time-consuming to collect, is limited in scale, which in turn limits scope for generalisation. Third, the interview process is undoubtedly not free of impact on the interviewer of the interviewee, at both interviewing and transcribing stages. Ways of protecting the data from these influences are discussed later.

The semi-structured interview was adopted for this study in preference to other forms of interview (for example unstructured interview and structured interview) following several considerations and compromises. According to Kvale (1996), it was neither a structured interview which allowed respondents to make only restricted choices, nor an interview with open-ended purposes. In other words, the semi-structured interview is a combination of the structured and unstructured ones and mixes the

merits of both. As May (2011) noted in describing the semi-structured interview, ‘questions are normally specified, but the interviewer is freer to probe beyond the answers in a manner which would appear prejudicial to the aims of standardization and comparability’ (May, 2011, p.123). To collect information which is related to participants’ subjectivity and to reduce redundancy, the method of semi-structured interview was adopted. Moreover, besides the latitude given to both interviewer and interviewees, the advantage of readily focusing and steering the discussion was also a consideration for selecting a semi-structured interview format.

#### *3.3.4 Timing and frequency of data collection*

As indicated in Table 3.1 (on page 93-94), longitudinal studies of student groups normally collect data from students at the beginning of programmes, at the intermediate stage and at the end. However, studies of Master’s students face the additional challenge of whether to collect the final set of data at the end of the taught component of the course at the end of the second semester or after submission of dissertation four months later. It is known that many international students leave the UK to do the research for their dissertations in their own countries and do not return. This is likely to make maintaining contact with some research participants difficult or impossible and/or reduce the numbers of students who participate in all stages of the research. For these reasons, the current study is focused on the first two semesters of Master’s programmes only.

Qualitative data was therefore collected in the current research at three points in the taught component of Master’s programmes (at the beginning, half way through, and at the end of the taught component) with, at the second and third points, some changes in the foci of interviews and questions asked.

#### *3.3.5 Key themes, relevant questions and interview schedule*

The eight main themes summarised in the **Literature Review** and included in the first column of Table 3.2 below are broken down to several sub-themes listed in column 2. It was suggested in the **Literature Review** that different stages of transitions have



different focuses. Questions were therefore asked in different forms and given different prominences in each of the three interviews for the purpose of identifying and exploring possible changes in students' conceptions and perceptions over time. Briefly, as Table 3.2 indicates, while questions in the Interview Time 1 explored participants' experiences of undergraduate teaching and learning in China and the differences they found when first encountering the British postgraduate context, those questions in Interview Times 2 and 3 focused on students' learning-teaching experiences in the fifth and ninth months of Master's programmes. Furthermore the questions in Time 2 explored the differences and adaptations made to date, while in Time 3 they emphasised student achievements, feedback and progress. All interview schedules have been attached respectively as Appendices 1, 2 and 3.

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Interview Time 1	Interview Time 2	Interview Time 3
1. Learning in China and the UK: key differences		√	Δ	Δ
2. Concepts of teaching and learning before postgraduate programme	a) Conceptions of teaching and learning	√	Δ	Δ
	b) Conceptions of good teaching and good learning	√	Δ	Δ
3. Pedagogical content and disciplinary differences	a) Good student and teacher in your programme	√	Δ	Δ
	b) Teaching and learning at Edinburgh University	√ With the focus on teaching in modules of Semester 1	Δ With the focus on teaching in modules of Semester 2	Δ With the focus on dissertation supervision
	c) Workload	√		
	d) Assessment		√	Δ
	e) Supervision and dissertation			√
4. Adaptation	a) Social life	√	Δ	Δ
	b) Time-management	√	Δ	Δ
	c) Rewards, challenges, difficulties and language progress	√	Δ	Δ
	d) Students' achievement			Δ
5. Motivational orientation		√	Δ	Δ
6. Cultural differences	a) Tutor-student relationship	√	Δ	Δ
	b) Learning experiences	√	Δ	Δ
7. Challenges , difficulties and language		√	Δ	Δ
8. Feedback about programmes and about the university		√	Δ	Δ

√ Theme asked

Δ Same theme asked in different forms (students' views in comparison to previous responses to lead participants' comparisons)

**Table 3.2 Themes and relevant questions presented in Interview Times 1, 2 and 3**

In terms of why and how specific questions were produced, four aspects are worth noting. Firstly, the first group of questions is abstract, and focuses on how students conceive of teaching and learning. Questions about perceptions of learning were more practically focused, as they were constructed and formed by individual's previous experience and particular circumstances, which are in certain respects distinctive from one individual to another (Entwistle, 2009).

Secondly, assuming that the knowledge content of different course modules may vary even within the same Master's programme, we should bear in mind the possibility that the students may have different conceptions of learning and perceptions of learning in different courses. Because of this, the interview schedule was designed to meet the need to explore respondents' experiences in each course module.

Thirdly, questions regarding the role of teacher-student in academic life, peer interaction and teacher-student relationships in social life were considered to be a useful way of probing how Chinese students viewed themselves in a host educational culture and how this influenced their learning experiences (Entwistle, 2009).

Fourthly, although the **Literature Review** has suggested the importance of students' motivational factors in relation to their learning experiences, the current research did not have the scope of resources to investigate the motivation dimension of these transitions adequately. Instead, I was attentive to indications of students' confidence in an everyday sense. For example, how students' confidence developed as their Programmes progressed.

### *3.3.6 The data collection journey*

The design of the current study was influenced in several ways by the experience of and insights gained from a pilot study conducted in 2008/09. This was especially the case with regard to data collection aspects of the study, in particular the timetable for collecting data from students and how student research participants were recruited.

### *3.3.6.1 The data collection timetable*

It was intended that the first phase of the interview schedule (at the beginning of Master's programme) should focus on the first impression of coming into contact with the teaching-learning environment in the UK and experience of the differences between learning experiences in China and in the UK and that the second phase of interview (halfway through Master's programme) should focus on learning experiences in semester 1 and assessment. The final phase of the interview (at the end of the Master's programme) was designed to explore feedback on the students' overall experience of the Master's programme.

One of the lessons learned from the pilot study however was that, because the timing of the interviews in the pilot study was not ideal, that study did not successfully capture students' real perception. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, the first phase of pilot study interviews took place in November, 2008. Participants had begun their courses two or more months earlier so found it difficult to recall how they felt at the very beginning of their programmes. Secondly, the timings chosen for three pilot study interview periods (November 2008, March and July 2009) fell just before term examinations when students may have been less accessible. Even when participants accepted the invitation to interview, they may have been distracted by exam preparation.

### *3.3.6.2 Recruiting research participants*

#### The means of contacting interview participants in pilot study (2008/09)

When discussing how participants were recruited, it is important to mention how the experience of recruiting participants for the pilot study influenced the strategy for recruiting participants to the main study. When preparing for the pilot study in 2008/09 I decided to contact potential participants before they came to the UK. I was able to do this because some former postgraduate students who had known me in 2007/08 introduced me to some potential MSc students. Some of whom had graduated from the same Chinese universities as them and who planned to enroll across different disciplines and Master's programmes at the University of Edinburgh

in 2008/09. With the assistance of these former postgraduates I had approached ten students before they came to Edinburgh. These 10 students introduced me to a further 15 students who were likely to study at Edinburgh in 2008/09. I decided for two reasons to keep in touch with all 25 of them. Firstly, I had not decided how many and which MSc programmes would be targeted in the pilot study (2008/09). This was because I did not know how many Chinese students would enroll. I also knew that to guarantee the validity and reliability of the study, it would be necessary to have three or more participants from each programme. Secondly, I knew that although they had accepted offers from the University of Edinburgh, some of the students I stayed in contact with still had other offers from other UK universities. To prevent losing potential interview participants of pilot study, I attempted to approach all of them.

I collected information regarding the programmes of those students who did come to Edinburgh in 2008/09, namely the subject matter, the structure of programmes, the number of Chinese students enrolled and the number of Chinese students who would like to participate in the pilot study. By a careful investigation, three programmes were targeted, namely *MSc Education*, *MSc Signal Processing and Communications (SPC)*, and *MSc Finance and Investments (FI)*. In each of these programmes, one student participated in the pilot study. The reasons for selecting these programmes for this study and details of the criteria for selecting research participants will be revisited in detail later in this chapter.

This strategy did not work well in all areas of the pilot study. For example, compared to participants in other MSc programmes who got in touch in September 2008, those from *MSc FI* did not respond until the end of October, 2008.

#### The means of contacting interview participants in main study (2009/10)

When the time came to recruit participants for the main study (2009/10), I adopted several strategies for contacting and recruiting participants.

Firstly, I widened my network of contacts further through contact with the MSc students of 2007/08 and 2008/09. These students were happy to help. They had

known me for more than one year and had built a good interpersonal connection with me. I had offered these students information about living and studying at Edinburgh before they came to the UK and during academic year 2008/09. I had interviewed them three times and made them aware that their input and contribution in this research were valued and acknowledged. They felt honoured to participate in the research and hoped this research could be continued, as they looked forward to seeing their own cases and data shown on the researcher's thesis.

Secondly, I attempted to contact potential participants for the 2009/10 study who were still in China by internet. Because access to Facebook is not permitted on mainland China other internet forums were used, such as MSN and QQ. QQ is particularly popular with Chinese university students as it is a chat tool like MSN or Skype, but also like Facebook, can be used to create online forums. With QQ online forum, people could join in any groups, such as the group of '2009/10 Edinburgh University Group'. Within this big group, there were lots of sub-groups by different programmes, such as '2009/10 MSc Signal Process and Communications at Edinburgh'. To access these potential participants, I registered as a new member in the QQ forum but as a new member was not eligible to post any information in the forum. With the assistance of a postgraduate student who participated in the pilot study in 2008/09 however I was able to post an advertisement on the forum in order to recruit respondents to the main study (2009/10). Pilot study participants had also posted positive comments regarding myself and my research and, encouraged by these positive comments and financial reward (twelve pounds each person), potential MSc students showed their willingness to join in the research.

Although I did make contact with future Edinburgh MSc students in China in these ways, the number of research participants was still limited. Hence, I employed the third strategy. I went to relevant events at the very beginning of the academic year. Firstly, I attended the university orientation programmes. However, not so many Chinese students were present, because some of them were still on the way to Edinburgh or were sightseeing. Secondly, being a former *MSc Education* student in 2006/07, I was invited to attend a programme meeting to welcome new *MSc Education*

students in September 2010. In this welcome meeting, by the invitation of the programme director, I was introduced and new *MSc Education* students were invited to participate in my research. Thirdly, to widen the network and to get to know new students, I also attended an event held by Mayfield Church. It was an event not only aimed at introducing the Bible and Christianity to newcomers, but also to help new Chinese students to learn English. The event was popular among Chinese new students as some of priests in this church are Chinese and can communicate in Mandarin.

The fourth strategy was to use posters. The poster has been attached as Appendix 6. With the assistance of the researcher's former and new respondents, recruiting posters were attached on the notice boards in the Main Library, Darwin Library, the Business School, the Informatics Forum, the Moray House School of Education and in student accommodation centres.

### 3.3.6.3 *The criteria and process for selecting MSc programmes*

After successfully making contact with the new MSc students in 2009/10, three MSc programmes were targeted, namely *MSc Education*, *MSc Signal Processing and Communications (SPC)* and *MSc Finance and Investment (FI)*. There were three reasons for selecting these programmes.

To achieve a representative range of samples, I decided to target MSc programmes from different colleges. The *MSc Education* was selected from the College of Humanities and Social Science mainly because I was a former student in 2006/07 and knew about the course structure and the methods of teaching. The *MSc SPC* in the College of Engineering was chosen because the numbers of Chinese students in this programme were bigger than in other programmes in that college.

As mentioned in the **Literature Review**, a third programme sharing the characteristics of both soft and hard disciplines was required. Initially, MSc Economics was considered. However, few students showed an interest in participating but also a careful check of the course booklet revealed that MSc Economics had a strong

theoretical focus and shared several characteristics with soft discipline subjects. I therefore contacted students from *MSc FI*, which not only attracts large numbers of Chinese students (more than 100) but also, and most importantly, places value not only on theoretical perspectives (soft), but also paid attention to practical applications (for example, case studies based on everyday life) and mathematical calculations (hard). The Chinese student I contacted within this programme was also glad to encourage her cohort-mates to participate.

#### *3.3.6.4 The criteria for selecting research participants*

Several considerations were born in mind when selecting the interview participants to take part in the research from those who expressed interest in participating.

Firstly, the selection of participants was restricted to Chinese students who had finished their undergraduate studies in mainland China. Students educated in Hong Kong and Taiwan may share similar educational backgrounds to those from mainland China. But because their teaching-learning environments and educational systems are significantly different, they were not selected.

Secondly, students whose prior overseas learning experiences were less than one year were selected, as their learning experiences in mainland Chinese universities would still be recently fresh in their minds and they had little, if any, previous experience of significant changes in their environment.

Thirdly, students whose partners or family members were English native speakers were also not chosen, because it was presumed that they might be more likely to encounter fewer difficulties in adapting to the western educational context. While selecting interview participants it was noted that there were a small number of volunteers whose boyfriends or family members were native English speakers. Consideration was given to including these volunteers as participants as they could perhaps illuminate differences and similarities to the mainstream research participants. However, given that this group of Chinese students was limited in size, and there were too few for them in every targeted MSc programme, this idea was abandoned.



Originally, it was planned to recruit nineteen respondents, namely six respondents from *MSc Education*, six from *MSc SPC*, and seven from *MSc FI*. However, a statement that participants could withdraw at any time was included on the consent form and an *MSc Education* student withdrew after the first phase of interviews. After several failed attempts to contact this participant I destroyed her data in both electronic and paper versions.

Finally, as shown in Table 3.3, eighteen participants attended three phases of interviews across three contrasting programmes, namely *MSc Education* (n=5), *MSc SPC* (n=6), and *MSc FI* (n=7). Findings based on interviews with these 18 research participants will be introduced in the three subsequent **Findings** chapters.

<b>Data collection</b>	<i>MSc Education</i>	<i>MSc SPC</i>	<i>MSc FI</i>
Interview Time 1	Oct 10-19, 2010. n=5	Oct 10-19, 2010. n=6	Oct 10-19, 2010. n=7
Interview Time 2	Feb 2-11, 2010. n=5	Feb 2-11, 2010. n=6	Feb2-11, 2010. n=7
Interview Time 3	Jun 4-18, 2010. n=5	Jun 4-18, 2010. n=6	Jun 4-18, 2010. n=7
Sub-total	15 interviews	18 interviews	21 interviews
<b>Total</b>	<b>54 interviews</b>		

**Table 3.3 Summary of data collection timetable**

### 3.3.6.5 Strategies for maintaining interviewee participation

Several strategies were used to maintain participants' participation.

First, a financial reward was offered. Each interview participant was paid £12 in total for three phases of interviews but to prevent losing them, the first payment (£4) was paid at the second interview and the second (£8) at the final interview, and signed

receipts for payments were given. A sample of signed receipts has been included as Appendix 5. This gradual increase of the reward amount encouraged research participants' ongoing participation. The *MSc Education* students refused the monetary rewards because they thought money compromised a good relationship with me as a former *MSc Education* student. Instead, they were promised advice and knowledge from me about how to be a good student in the Programme. However, it was risky for these *MSc Education* students who were not paid, but participated in the research as volunteers. This risk will be discussed later.

Second, all the interview participants benefited from getting information regarding living and studying at the university especially before they came to the UK. For example, I provided information about how to open a bank account. Through frequent communication with the researcher, they already knew how to prepare for learning and living in Edinburgh. In return, they were glad to contribute to the research.

Third, their time schedules and preferences for the interview location were satisfied as fully as possible. To cater for other time commitments, the interview time and location was negotiated in advance. To be convenient for interviewees, most interviews took place at respondents' flats. Other interviews were conducted in the nearest library or study buildings. The interview was arranged for a time that suited them between 9am to 10pm, Monday to Sunday. They could change the time by phone calls, emails and text messages.

Finally, their contributions and input were valued and appreciated. When the interview finished, thanks and appreciation were given to each interviewee. Christmas cards were also posted to their addresses to thank them for their support.

#### *3.3.6.6 Interview protocol*

An active interviewing protocol was used for interviews with research respondents because, compared to traditional or standard interview protocols, this is a more open-ended approach, which considers interviewers and interviewees as equal

partners in constructing meaning within an interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

According to Holstein and Gubrium (1995), standard interview design has attempted to limit the role of interviewer to a 'safe' standpoint, which is to maintain a neutral position without any suspicion of impacting interviewees' accounts and belief. The role of interviewees is to be a repository of information which is waiting for interviewer's questions to uncover. However, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) claim that interviews take place in a cultural melting pot, where it is less valuable to collect 'truth' from a passive interviewee and is an interview process without sufficient interactions. In other words, the question-answer mode is less likely to detect the 'truth' or the real information, which was the key aim of the current exploratory research. By virtue of considering the interview as a method of approaching 'truth' by cultural and communicational interactions with respondents, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) advise the interviewer to allocate interviewees a much more active role in the interview process by encouraging active conversation and sharing. By adopting this approach interviewees' views may be revealed and genuine information may be elicited.

The second justification for choosing an interview protocol which does not limit the role of interviewer to a neutral viewpoint is that participating actively in the process of interview does not, compared with other protocols, diminish the validity and reliability of the research findings. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) advocate that it is impossible to maintain absolute reliability because it is unlikely that any interview would produce exactly the same answers no matter when and where it occurs. They demonstrated that respondents' accounts varied because of differences encountered in the interview process, research aims and context. Therefore, they argue, the validity of the data would not be impaired if the interviewer actively joined in the interview conversation, unless the respondent did not really know how to express his/her true ideas originally and faithfully. Nevertheless, if the interviewer retreated to a neutral position, it is likely that she/he might be less likely to probe, as the elicitation of respondents' true feelings requires great care (Holstein and Gubrium, 2002). Moreover, the 'truth' that interviewees might give in response was not the information they 'dare[d] to say', but

an argument they ‘choose [chose] to say’ (Pool, 1957, p.192). Therefore, an active interviewer’s involvement is required to encourage respondents’ willingness to speak readily.

In this current research, during the interview process, I – the researcher – tried to show great awareness when engaging with respondents by using both verbal cues and body language. The effectiveness of this strategy was reflected in comments offered by interviewees at the end of interview. Many indicated that they wanted to continue the conversation. From their reflections, it was evident that they were pleased to participate and felt valued. Therefore, it may be assumed that the use of active interview techniques captured authentic Chinese students’ overseas learning experiences. However, it should still be acknowledged that, because the interviewer takes an active role in the interview process, it is still necessary to test the reliability and validity of data carefully.

Third, the interviewer’s active engagement in the interview also made it possible to use everyday language. This was important in this present inquiry. In addition, I employed non-verbal expressions and body language to encourage interviewees to elaborate, such as ‘Uh-huh’ or ‘hmm’ and nodding my head. If misdirection was evident or if the respondents’ strayed onto a topic far away from the research aim, an appropriate interview strategy was to pause the conversation and bring it back to the main themes in a polite manner.

### *3.3.6.7 The interviewer-interviewee relationships*

The use of an active interviewing protocol defined the interviewer-interviewee relationships in the current research. The biggest challenge faced by this researcher was how to maintain a professional stance in interviews. To maintain interviewee participation, I needed to keep in regular touch with the respondents. However, I was aware that the close interpersonal relationships which developed might potentially have worked against the objectivity of the research. The importance of achieving a good balance was demonstrated during the second phase of interviews (February 2010) when I had several failed attempts to contact three *MSc Education* students. After

attempting to contact them by email, I had to ask for help from one of their cohort-mates who still wanted to be a research participant.

From her account, it appeared that these three students expected me to advise them on how to prepare and write essays. Because I was not willing to influence their learning experience in the *MSc Education*, no instruction was given. However, after the second interview, they tended to avoid my contacts. In order to encourage their willingness and maintain the participation, a compromise had to be made. I agreed to answer questions after the final phase of the interview.

### *3.3.7 Analysis of interview data*

The present research analysed data gained from semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis. This was chosen because it was particularly suited to the nature of the present research: thematic analysis is exploratory and concerned with the socio-cultural context in which the data occurs (Weurlander, 2012).

However, this method also has disadvantages. For example, thematic analysis is more likely to be criticised for lacking rigour (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This is because interpretation would be never free from the researcher's personal subjective understanding and perspective (Weurlander, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore reliability checking thematic analysis is difficult to conduct by research peers because it is impossible to apply the same subjective perspective between different people (Loffe and Yardley, 2004). Nevertheless, the rigour of thematic analysis can be enhanced by using both the inductive and deductive approaches.

The current research design was not only devised to test previous literature and existing theories, it also aimed to uncover new themes and theories. Therefore on the one hand, the deductive thematic analysis, which is analyst-driven, was used in the current research to test previous literature in a different circumstance and to compare data-invoking categories across different time periods. On the other hand, in line with the tradition of grounded theory, the inductive thematic analysis, which has a data-driven and content sensitive nature, was also employed to provide richer

descriptions of the data in a general sense based on the existing theories and the researcher's interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Accordingly, the combination of these two approaches was not only able to enhance two commitments of the current research – theory-testing and theory-sensitivity to enhance rigour but it also avoided the danger of missing analyses either at the manifest or the latent content level.

Although thematic analysis only needs to consider either the manifest or the latent level of content (Braun and Clarke, 2006), both levels were considered in the current research. This is because, while a manifest level of thematic analysis seeks only to describe the surface data, a latent level of analysis tries to interpret the data going beyond the semantic content and theorizes the underlying assumptions and conceptualizations (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Consequently, all the case studies (nine main case studies and nine mini case studies) were analysed by the same method – thematic analysis in both inductive and deductive approaches at both manifest and latent levels.

#### *3.3.7.1 Case study groupings*

Three research participants were selected as the first of three groups to be analysed as the main case studies. They were Rita (from *MSc Education*), Lucy (from *MSc FI*) and Charles (from *MSc SPC*). There were three reasons for choosing these participants. Firstly, all of them were the first person from their respective MSc programme to be interviewed. Analysing these three interview participants' data first was a good way to set a big 'scene' about what each MSc programme and the Chinese students were like. Secondly, compared to other research participants, these three participants were more able to provide enough information about their programmes and the circumstances in which they and their cohort-mates were involved. More explicitly, Rita was one of the most experienced and a mature student, who was, compared to other research participants in *MSc Education*, more capable of making sense of her new environment in the UK. Lucy and Charles, although not class representatives in the *MSc FI* and *MSc SPC* respectively, were both key figures in the

Chinese groups who were popular and well-liked. They therefore showed greater awareness and understanding of their programme and of the University of Edinburgh. Thirdly, all three research participants had similar backgrounds to the majority of their Chinese cohort-mates in respect of their living and working experiences and subject backgrounds in China (see **Findings** chapters for their details).

At a later stage, Zack, Dick and Dani were analysed as the second group of main case studies. The first two were chosen because they had different backgrounds to the first group of main cases. Although like Rita, Zack had also had gap years between his undergraduate and Master's studies, his academic and working experiences were not fruitful like Rita's. Moreover, his background was more different from the majority of students in *MSc Education*, because he had a major change from one subject to another and his English proficiency before coming to the UK was at a lower level than others in his Master's cohort. Similarly, Dick, a student in *MSc FI*, had similar background experience when embarking on his programme (as described in the **Findings** chapter). Finally, Dani, one of few female students in *MSc SPC*, was selected, because compared to other female research participants, she shared more similarities with her Chinese cohort-mates.

Fiona (*MSc FI*), Tracy (*MSc Education*) and Emily (*MSc SPC*) were chosen to be analysed as the third group of main case studies. This was because they were different from the rest of research participants in some distinctive way. Unlike the majority of research participants, Fiona received western-style of teaching in China and Tracy was one of *MSc Education* participants who had not changed subject significantly. Lastly, Emily unlike her Chinese peers in *MSc SPC*, did not live in university accommodation. This was because she did not come from a wealthy family. In addition, while most of her Chinese peers planned to return to China after graduation, she planned to go to Canada or the USA.

As they were equally important, minor case studies were selected from students/participants who had had similar life experiences to the students chosen as major case studies. They were analysed in the same way as major cases. This will

be unpacked in each **Findings** chapter.

### *3.3.7.2 Analysing interview data*

All interview data gathered from these students were analysed using a five step process as described below.

#### Step 1. Familiarising the researcher with the data and transcribing interview recordings

After becoming familiar with the entire data set by listening and re-listening to the interview recordings, data derived from the 18 interview respondents was manually transcribed and translated in full in anonymised form. Participants were allocated pseudonyms. As the transcripts were translated for presentation as evidence, several techniques were adopted to minimize the negative influence of inappropriate translation from English to Chinese. First, a copy of the interview questions written in both English and Chinese was given to interviewees to facilitate their understanding of the interview questions and to give them a sense of the main focus of this interview. Second, important words were checked with interviewees where they might present a problem in subsequent translation. Third, although participants were asked to communicate in Chinese for the sake of ease and efficiency, they could use appropriate English words spontaneously whenever they thought English might be better in capturing their meaning.

#### Step 2. Assembling and organising data

Following on from step 1, all the transcripts, especially at the first and the second phases of data analysis were re-read, open-coded and organised into clusters of potential themes in accordance with interviewee characteristics, programmes studied, timing of interview, and in light of themes explored in the **Literature Review**, for example, learning across level of study, learning across culture, learning across subject and learning in English.

#### Step 3. Reducing and integrating the coding sheet



By reviewing, re-selecting and re-organising, the initial coding sheet was refined into several important themes. At this step, consistency, contrasts and comparisons between each segment were carefully checked and reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set in order to build inter-relationships between themes.

#### Step 4. Constant comparison and finding emergent themes

In accordance with the tradition of grounded theory, the data-driven themes were constantly compared in terms of the consistency across three phases of interview. Then new data and unexpected data were compared with findings from previous studies documented in the **Literature Review** to find similarities and differences. While similar themes functioned to test hypotheses and support these prior findings, new themes emerged during analysis.

#### Step 5. Triangulation

Trustworthiness was enhanced by constant comparison between the individual's interviews across three phases and checked by returning transcripts to interview participants. The robustness of the data was also checked against the results of a survey sent to a larger sample of Chinese Master's students at the end of the taught component of a wider range of 2009/10 Master's programmes.

### *3.3.8 Quantitative data collection*

Compared to qualitative data analysis, quantitative data analysis has the advantage of being more systematised (Punch, 1998), less influenced by the researcher's subjective bias, and more able to make comprehensive generalisations (Punch, 1998). To triangulate the interview data and to provide a broader picture in which to situate the qualitative data, an invitation to respond to the survey was posted online in July 2010 to reach a wider range of University of Edinburgh Chinese Master's students enrolled in a wide range of Master's programmes. 95 questionnaires were returned.

### 3.3.8.1 Questionnaire/Survey schedule

As Table 3.4 shows, some of the survey questions were borrowed from the interview schedule, but with a sharp emphasis on perceived similarities and differences between learning in China and in the UK.

These eight questions were selected in preference to others in the interview schedule, because the interviews had shown that these questions were the most helpful questions for providing valuable data. As shown in Table 3.4, the survey questions were related

	<b>Key theme or topic</b>
1	Similarities/differences between teaching in China and teaching in the UK
2	Similarities/differences between what the Chinese students expected to learn
3	Similarities/differences between teacher-student relationships in China and those in the UK
4	Similarities/differences between university/teachers' support for studying in China and in the UK
5	Similarities/differences between assessments in China and in the UK
6	Similarities/differences between feedback received in China and in the UK
7	Similarities/differences between the interviewees' time and effort devoted in China and in the UK
8	Similarities/differences between English capabilities (for example reading, speaking, writing and listening in English) before the start of Master's level learning and at the end of the taught component

**Table 3.4 Questionnaire schedule topics**

to six areas, namely teaching approaches, tutor-student relationships, guidance and support, assessment, time management and language. In order to explore the questionnaire participants' deeper perceptions, both close- and open-questions were used in order to explore both 'what' and 'why' dimensions, and questionnaire participants were asked to indicate the extent of such differences, similarities and the challenges experienced in making adaptations. The full version of the questionnaire is attached as Appendix 7.

### *3.3.8.2 Questionnaire participants, timetable and limitations*

This survey was dispatched in both a paper form and as an online form to a wider range of Chinese Master's students from various disciplinary backgrounds across different colleges at the University of Edinburgh between 30 June to 30 July 2010 as students finished the taught component of their course and entered the dissertation phase. The questionnaire was deliberately brief to maximise the likelihood of a positive response.

It was intended that the survey results would confirm the extent to which the experiences of students in the three case study programmes were representatives of Master's students at Edinburgh more generally.

Although the survey results were able to set the 'scene' in which the interview participants in the three focused programmes operated, it was not possible to use them to generalise about Chinese Master's student experiences. This was partly a consequence of the survey being sent to a wide range of participants from a large number of different Master's programmes. As a result too many variables were introduced. It was also because, although 95 students returned the survey, the number of questionnaires returned from any given Master's programme was limited. Some Master's programmes had enrolled a limited number of Chinese students in 2009/10, so the maximum number of questionnaires returned from these courses was too low to be of value. A further problem was that although some programmes had a sufficient number of Chinese students, not all of them were contactable when the questionnaire was sent out because they had already left Edinburgh. It was therefore decided not to use the quantitative data collected by survey to triangulate the qualitative data. Establishing the trustworthiness of the current research by other means therefore became more important.

## **3.4 Trustworthiness of the Current Research**

The current research's trustworthiness was enhanced by use of two main aspects or processes – the process of analysing qualitative data and the process of translation.

### 3.4.1 Trustworthiness of the qualitative research

While validity, reliability and generalisability are three critical criteria when assessing findings in quantitative research (Kvale, 1996), these methodological criteria are difficult to apply in qualitative research. This is because qualitative research is concerned with human beings' perceptions of their lived world and reliance on the researcher's subjective interpretation is different from quantitative research. In other words, qualitative research welcomes future re-interpretation from different perspectives (Lather, 1993; Nielson, 1995) because temporary 'truth' is believed to be approached by continuous negotiating through dialogues and conversations (Kvale, 1996). In contrast, quantitative researchers hold positivist assumptions to access truth by being distant from the subjective bias (Angen, 2000) and this truth should be transferable and testable in other circumstances.

Acknowledging that it is difficult to offer as much scientific rigour in qualitative research as is offered in quantitative research, some writers have argued that there is a need to reform the concept of validity (Smith, 1990; Mishler, 1990). Other researchers have contributed to this reformulation. For example, recognising that it is only possible to approach 'truth' from our own perspective, in qualitative research, Hammersley (1995) redefines validity as confidence but not certainty to indicate the subjective nature of a qualitative research. Similarly but more specifically, Mishler (1990) reformulated validation as the social construction of knowledge:

With this reformulation the key issue becomes whether the relevant community of scientists evaluates reported findings as sufficiently trustworthy to rely on them for their own work. (p.427)

Based on Mishler's reformulation, Angen advanced the old term 'validity' as a new term 'validation' for reasons explained here:

The term *validation* rather than *validity* is used deliberately to emphasise the way in which a judgment of the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research is continuous process occurring within a community of researchers... (Angen, 2000, p.387)

In other words, there are neither fixed and particular rules to test the validity of a piece

of research or a domain of inquiry (Mishler, 1990) and nor should every study be required to address every step of validation (Smith, 1990).

Accordingly, the steps taken to maximise the trustworthiness of the current research are follows. First, in the pilot study discussed previously, an initial version of interview schedules was dispatched to 2008/09 Master's students. At the end of every interview, participants' feedback was sought concerning how easy it was to invoke true thoughts and how the interview schedule could be improved, for example with regard to the coherent flow of questions, the way the questions were asked, and the numbers of interview questions. Although this first version of the interview schedule had been tested as a good interview schedule to be able to efficiently provoke true feelings, in 2009/10 before the first phase of interview it was re-tested and revised with the help of three new Master's students from each targeted MSc programme. These three volunteers contributed to the development of the second version of interview schedule as an up-to-date version, which underwent some slight changes according to the changes of programme structure and module courses in 2009/10. These three volunteers were not included as valid samples, because they had known my research aims and approach to the current research. The reason why the pilot study was important will be revisited in *Trustworthiness in Chinese-English Translation*.

Second, the combination of inductive and deductive methods to analyse data and careful case selection helped to enhance trustworthiness. This has been discussed in detail in the preceding section.

Third, trustworthiness was also sought by maximising presentations of direct quotations from the participants' accounts. This was because paraphrasing might not accurately represent their original perceptions and personal interpretations. Moreover, presenting the research participants' direct accounts could facilitate future researchers' re-interpretations.

Fourth, as shown previously, I – as a former Master's student at the same university as

my respondents – worked hard to maintain a good relationship with them. This helped these participants to be aware that they did not need to be ashamed of having difficulties with coping with challenges, because, using an active interviewing approach, I was able to share with them that I had experienced a similar situation and could understand their stress, frustration and sense of achievement.

Fifth, trustworthiness of the current research was also achieved by being aware of the risk of making generalisations across participants' accounts situated in different socio-cultural contexts. Failure to do this would have resulted in not capturing sufficiently variations in different views and perceptions.

### *3.4.2 Trustworthiness in Chinese-English translation*

Translation issues will be discussed and highlighted here to demonstrate the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of data collection, analysis and presentation. This was because, while the interview schedule of the current research was prepared in English, all actual interviews were conducted in Chinese.

#### *3.4.2.1 The decision to translate*

The decision to translate the interview schedule from English to Chinese and to use Chinese not English as the main communicative language during the interview requires explanation and justification. Firstly, using Chinese, the research participants' first language, helped them to feel comfortable and encouraged them to talk. As mentioned in the **Literature Review**, the language barrier becomes a psychological barrier which may restrict Chinese students' willingness and confidence to talk. The translation strategy was supported by the evidence in the pilot study in 2008/09: volunteers preferred Chinese to English as the interview language. Later in the 2009/10 main study, this decision was confirmed as appropriate by two research participants, who said they were relieved after hearing that the interview would be conducted in Chinese. Secondly, the first phase of interview was conducted within one or two months of new Chinese Master's students arriving in the UK. Because they were not used to speaking English as an everyday language in China or trained to

speak it, they were less able to use English to express their ideas.

Consequently, the current researcher, who had been a first-year Chinese PhD student in 2008, translated the interview schedule from English to Chinese and, to optimise the accuracy of the translation and improve the flow to invoke interviewees' responses, had the draft peer-checked by two Chinese final-year PhD students at the University of Edinburgh. Later, this revised interview schedule in Chinese was used in the pilot study and tested with three volunteering Chinese Master's students from the targeted programmes, namely *MSc Education*, *MSc FI* and *MSc SPC* in 2008/09.

This final checking with the 2008/09 Chinese Master's students for each of the three interview phases (at the beginning, at the halfway point and at the end of Master's programmes) was necessary. On the one hand, peer-checking with PhD students was not sufficient, because compared to the new Chinese Master's students, Chinese PhD students were advantaged by having been in the UK much longer and thus having a greater knowledge about western terms. As discussed in the **Literature Review**, the language domain goes beyond the rhetorical patterns of language to the socio-cultural context. Therefore, compared to the newly-arrived Master's students, the peer-checking by two PhD students may not be sensitive to these UK-situated words and they may presume that new Master's students would understand. On the other hand, because they had been in the UK for many years, PhD students' ways of thinking and ways of using Chinese may have resulted in a gap with the thinking and ways of using the Chinese of the Master's students who had just left China. There are two reasons for this. First, having been away from China where fast developments, including in the Chinese language, are on-going, PhD students' Chinese vocabularies and ways of using Chinese may be out-of-date. Second, PhD students' ways of thinking and communicating had been influenced by their frequent use of UK-contextualised English, so their translation from English to Chinese may not be straightforward. Accordingly, checking with new Chinese students who just left their home country was used to bring the Chinese translation closer to the recent way of communication in Chinese.

However, while Chinese was used as the main interview language, some English words were kept in the interview schedule for some purposes. Table 3.5 explains in detail what these words and phrases were and why they were kept in the original English form.



English key words kept in the Chinese interview schedule	Reason for keeping
Teaching and learning	In the interview schedule, they always appeared as a pair to suggest that they were equally important key words in the current research.
Teaching-learning experience	This phase in Chinese is more likely to give an uneven balance, which gives more emphasis to teaching performances and less to learning experiences. So this original term was kept to show equal importance.
Tutorial	There is no equivalent term in Chinese because in China normally a tutorial is not a teaching-learning form separated from and different from a lecture.
Group discussion	The equivalent form in Chinese blurs the differences between classroom group discussion and students' spontaneous grouping outside the classroom. So this original term was kept because, in this interview schedule, it particularly referred to the group discussion as a featured teaching-learning method in the UK classroom.
Critical thinking	Because this word in Chinese has multiple meanings, for example 'critical reflection based on evidence' and 'being criticising and suspicious of everything', to avoid mis-understandings, it was decided to keep its English form. Moreover, as mentioned in the <b>Literature Review</b> chapter, this concept was a distinct requirement in the UK at the Master's level, which Chinese students may have difficulty understanding completely. It is one of aims in the current research to explore how the Chinese Master's students perceive and experience this UK-situated learning requirement.
Examination and assignment	They were kept in the English form to distinguish these two particular assessment methods, especially in <i>MSc FI</i> which uses both to assess students' learning. Although there is an equivalent form in Chinese, it is a general and abstract term which blurs their differences.
Listening, speaking, reading and writing	These four words were kept in English in the interview schedule because this strategy was helpful to remind the interviewees of their IELTS exam experience. IELTS exam score stands for their English capabilities before coming to the UK. IELTS exam includes four parts to assess English capabilities, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. So keeping their origin English forms helped to invoke their accounts when they were asked to self-reflect on their improvements in using English before the commencement of their Master's programmes and their recent capabilities several months after. Students were therefore able to automatically make a comparison with and link to their IELTS performances.
Undergraduate/postgraduate level	These two terms were kept in English form. This is because they present distinctiveness between levels of studies, which is a key theme in the interview schedule. They helped the interviewees to be aware that the aim of the interview questions was to ask the differences between undergraduate experiences in China and Master's learning experiences in the UK.
Lab-book	The volunteer student in <i>MSc SPC</i> in the 2008/09 pilot study suggested that this term should be kept in English. Later this strategy was confirmed in the 2009/10 main study when every interviewee in <i>MSc SPC</i> quoted this English form rather than translating into Chinese.
Feedback	This term was kept originally because, from the first phase of interview, all the interviewees wanted to use its English form rather than the Chinese form.
Dissertation	The English form was kept when the interview questions referred to Master's dissertation in the UK and its Chinese translation was used when suggesting the undergraduate dissertation in China. It highlights the contextual features to help the interviewees to understand the questions.

**Table 3.5 The rationale for using English words in the interview questions**

### *3.4.2.2 Strategies used in 2009/10 interviews*

Several strategies were used to maximise student confidence in the interview process and to help interviewees understand the purpose of the interview.

First, the interview schedule was emailed to all research participants in both the Chinese and the English version before interviews. This strategy aimed to relieve potential worries and panic because they had had few prior experiences of being interviewed. In addition, it also aimed to enhance their familiarity with the interview questions, which helped them to achieve a better understanding about interview questions.

Second, semi-formal levels of language were preferred rather than the formal or the informal levels in order to make the interviewees feel relaxed and encourage them to explore their true feelings.

Third, if the interview questions could not be fully understood either in English or in Chinese, I provided help, for example by paraphrasing or giving examples within some contexts.

### *3.4.2.3 Approaches to transcribing interviews*

Three digital recorders were used in every interview to avoid technical problems. The copy with the best recording quality was selected for transcription. It was decided that Chinese would be the language of transcription for two reasons. First, because Chinese was the main interview language, transcribing in Chinese would remain faithful to the interviewees' original accounts and meanings. In addition, all transcripts were reviewed after transcribing to check for accuracy. This strategy reduced the likelihood of mis-understandings being created through Chinese to English translation during transcription.

Transcription strategies varied according to the specific aims of different transcribing phases and stages.

Before transcribing from recordings to texts in Chinese, key decisions had to be made largely in terms of how to transcribe and what to transcribe. For example, some writers have suggested that if the research aim is to explore a group of individuals' values, beliefs or experiences, a greater number of text units should be offered to give fruitful and in-depth data analysis (McLellan et al., 2003). It was therefore decided that, to support the level of textual analysis required for this study, the transcriptions should be as full as possible. Kvale (2009) has also noted that 'The transcripts are...not the rock-bottom data of interview research, they are artificial constructions from an oral to a written mode of communication' (p.163). Therefore, some participants' non-linguistic expressions (such as facial expressions, body language, pause and ironic tones) were also noted in the transcriptions.

A further task in the process of transcribing was to keep the format of transcripts consistent. Thus, during transcription each transcript was transcribed in a standardised form and, to facilitate the comparison of themes within transcripts, included participants' personal information (such as the individual's real name, pseudonym, gender and date of birth) and details of interviews (interview dates and locations). This strategy reduced the time spent locating standard text elements (McLellan et al, 2003) and made it easier for the researcher to identify emergent themes.

After transcribing recordings to texts in Chinese, the accuracy of the transcripts and assuring that the English translation was appropriate at the cultural level were the main focus. Hence, transcripts were reviewed according to the researcher/interviewer's familiarity with the interviews and according to the consistency of each participant's accounts across three phases of interview. The accuracy of transcripts was also checked by participants' feedback. All transcripts in Chinese were also returned to research respondents who were asked to confirm that their meanings were correctly understood.

#### *3.4.2.4 Translating transcripts in Chinese to English*

When translating transcriptions from Chinese into English, two transcription principles were employed. First, a line-by-line approach was used to translate from Chinese language to English language word by word. This strategy helped to prevent missing potential valuable themes. Second, a global approach to making some expressions in Chinese sound more English was employed. In other words, during Chinese-English translation, the text was clarified and explained to the audience by paraphrasing and checking with native speakers of English.

### **3.5 Research Ethics**

It is acknowledged that social science research is sensitive to moral implications and that ‘ethical concerns should be at the forefront of any research project and should continue through to the write-up and dissemination stages’ (Wellington, 2003, p.3). This chapter, therefore concludes with details of the particular strategies adopted to address ethical concerns at different stages of the current research.

#### *3.5.1 Before the interview*

Step 1: I read about ethical issues.

Step 2: I discussed the particular ethical issues that should be considered within the current research with supervisors.

Step 3: An ethical application form was submitted to the relevant committee to gain approval to carry out this research.

Step 4: Research participants were asked to sign a consent form before interviews were conducted, which has been attached as Appendix 4. The consent form included:

- Information about the aims and nature of the current research;
- The identity and contact details of the researcher;
- The reason why the participants’ participation was important;
- A statement that participants had a right to withdraw from the study;

and

- Guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity throughout.

### *3.5.2 During the interview*

Step 1: The research participants were informed of their right to withdraw and were asked to sign the consent form. In the later interview phases, I read the content on the consent form to those participants orally to remind them of their rights.

Step 2: As previously suggested, two participants exercised their right to withdraw after they had been interviewed. My approach was to encourage them to re-engage. While this proved successful with one of them, another participant still preferred withdrawing. I therefore destroyed her data.

### *3.5.3 After the interview*

Step 1: The recordings were secured in a safe place.

Step 2: The transcripts were returned to research respondents, not only to seek their permission to be quoted or referenced in the future, but also as a strategy to help maintain validity and reliability.

Step 3: To ensure anonymity and privacy, when writing up to present findings, all participants were renamed. Moreover, some sensitive information was removed (for example, participants' personal information and the names of their UK teachers and the course names).

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### Findings from the MSc Education

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Following the data analysis approach described in detail in the preceding **Research Design** chapter, the current chapter and the following two chapters will present findings drawn from analysis of the eighteen case studies of students enrolled in the three MSc programmes selected for this research. Each Findings chapter will present a mixture of major and minor case studies in order to capture the full range of the students' experiences on that programme. A rationale for the decision to present the **Findings** chapters in this way, and for the selection of which cases would be major and which minor, is provided in a later section.

The current chapter deals with the findings which emerged from the *MSc Education* student case studies. It consists of four parts. The first part introduces the *MSc Education* programme and the context in which the five research participants were involved. This is followed by a general introduction to the major and mini case studies chosen for analysis. The detailed and specific findings are unpacked in the third part giving details of the individual case's background, experience of transitions and a summary. The concluding section flags findings which are considered further in the **Discussion and Implications** chapter.

#### **4.2 Introduction to MSc Education**

At the University of Edinburgh, the *MSc Education* is offered by the Moray House School of Education, which forms part of the College of Humanities and Social Science. This Programme was offered in 2009/10 on either a full-time or part-time basis. All five of the *MSc Education* students investigated in this study took this programme on a full-time basis for one year. They had all gained English level 6.5

overall and at least 6 in all sections of IELTS (an international standardised English test), as required for entry to the Programme. The taught components lasted from September 28 to December 19 2009 (Semester 1), and from January 11 to March 26 2010 (Semester 2).

As noted in the **Literature Review**, this Programme is in a soft-applied discipline. To demonstrate its distinctiveness when compared to the other targeted programmes in this study, Table 4.1, shown on the next page, outlines the Programme's aims, structure and methods of teaching and assessment.

As Table 4.1 indicates, the Programme aimed to help students to become qualified researchers or academic staff in any education-related institutions or organisations. Delivered in English through a combination of seminars and lectures, the taught course components encouraged students to engage critically with a wide range of perspectives on educational theory and to acquire/develop the research skills required for the dissertation component which was a substantial piece of independent research. Accordingly, critical thinking, independent self-directed study and the ability to plan and undertake independent research were key elements of this Programme.

Students could choose course modules in or across programmes in the College. However, none of participants took course modules in another programme. As Table 4.1 suggests, the content of most course modules did not overlap but was inter-related. Two core course modules – Educational Enquiry 1 and 2 were technically defined as half modules, each of which was delivered over a five-week period in each semester. They aimed to provide practical training on research skills, such as the formulation of research questions and research design, both of which are significant to academic writing. The remaining course modules mainly focused on providing general educational knowledge across different aspects of education, for example, international education or educational psychology. Each of the students was required to take four compulsory core courses and three optional courses from a choice of seven.

The only method of assessment was one final written essay for each course which was expected to be up to 4,000 words in most courses. Two modules – Education Enquiry 1 and 2 only required students to complete 2,000 words. Compared to the

		<i>MSc Education</i>
<b>Knowledge and understanding students are expected to gain from this Programme</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•social and philosophical reflection and debate;</li> <li>•systematic application of research evidence to the process of learning and teaching;</li> <li>•the development of international and comparative perspectives;</li> <li>•a critical analysis of discourses within the academic and policy communities.</li> </ul>
<b>Course modules</b>	<b>Semester 1</b>	Core courses: Ethics and Education; and Educational Enquiry 1.  Optional course: International Perspectives on Education and Training; Curriculum: Context, Change and Development; Educational and Training Systems of the UK.
	<b>Semester 2</b>	Core courses: Education Policy and the Politics of Education; and Educational Enquiry 2.  Optional courses: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning; Child and Adolescent Development; Educational Planning and Administration; Learning, Learners and Teaching. A total 180 credits (credits) in one academic year.
<b>Programme structure</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The teaching component: 5 core courses and 3 optional (total 120 credits);</li> <li>•Dissertation component: 60 credits.</li> </ul>
<b>Forms of teaching and learning</b>		A combination of lecture and student-led seminar/presentation
<b>Methods of assessment</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The teaching component: One essay required in each course module: 4,000 words.</li> <li>•The supervision component: Dissertation: 15,000 words.</li> </ul>

**Table 4.1** The details of the *MSc Education*

other two targeted programmes in this study, because there were no weekly quizzes or mid-term assessments, this Programme’s students had their learning on the course summatively assessed later. The dissertation could be empirical or non-empirical but had to demonstrate students’ research skills.



### **4.3 Justification for selection of the major and minor case studies**

As mentioned above, findings from the experiences reported by the five *MSc Education* research participants' experiences will be presented in a mixed form of major and minor case studies. A brief introduction to each interviewee is provided in Table 4.2. This is based on information given in the first interview about their background before coming to the UK, which included details of their language competence, prior experience of learning using western teaching-learning approaches, their first degree subject, any prior experience of living away from parents, the ranking of their undergraduate university in China, and any prior work experience.

Participants	Gender	Level of English		Whether had experienced western pedagogies		Whether had studied the same/similar subject; and what their undergraduate subjects had been		Had lived away from home		The ranking of their first degree university in China	Had worked between undergraduate and postgraduate degree	
		High	Satisfactory	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		Yes	No
<i>Major Case</i>												
1. Rita	Female	√		√			√ English	√		Average	√ 2 years	
2. Zack	Male		√	√			√ Advertising	√		Average	√ 4 years	
3. Tracy	Female	√			√	√ Social Work		√		Average		√
<i>Mini Case</i>												
4. Sherry	Female		√	√			√ English	√		Average	√ 1 year	
5. Cindy	Female		√	√		√ Social Work			√	Top	√ 1 year	

**Table 4.2** What research participants in *MSc Education* said about their previous experiences in China during Interview 1

**Case 1:** To get a big picture of the students' experiences in this Programme, Rita was chosen as a major case study. As suggested in Table 4.2 and according to her other accounts, she shared lots of similarities with the the majority of Chinese students enrolled on this Programme with regards to first degree subject and previous working experience. Meanwhile, she was also unique and different. More explicitly, she was:

- similar to mainstream participants, before coming to the UK she had taken an English teacher position and her first subject had been English (learning the English language, for example English Writing and English Linguistics under the western pedagogical culture);
- different from the majority of participants, her English proficiency and knowledge about the western (pedagogical) culture had been further boosted by two-years' work experience in a famous language training school, a British governmental organisation and a western business company in China;
- distinctively, her self-regulation and independence had been cultivated by being away from home for undergraduate study and running her own business;
- she was the only research participant who remotely managed her own business during her Master's learning.

**Case 2:** Based on the big picture represented by Rita's case, Zack was selected as the second major case study. This is because, as suggested from Table 4.2, his unique characteristics distinguished him from his peers. More exactly:

- he was the most mature-aged and only male student in this 09/10 Programme;
- he had changed subject from Advertising Studies to *Education*, which compared to his cohort mates, was the most considerable change;
- he had had the longest gap (four years) between his undergraduate and postgraduate studies;
- due to his financial situation, he was the only participant in this Programme who lived off-campus and who did part-time jobs during his Master's learning;
- before coming to the UK, he was the only participant who had taken several IELTS tests before he was able to satisfy the Programme's language requirement.

**Case 3:** Tracy's experience is presented as the third major case study. This is because, as intimated in Table 4.2, she was distinctive in terms of having the highest IELTS score, closely-related subject learning experiences and no study gap between her first and second degree:

- she and Cindy (Case 5) were the only two students in this Programme who had majored in Social Work at undergraduate level. In their view, they did not change subjects at all or their subject change was much slighter than the mainstream Chinese students in this Programme;
- she got the highest IELTS score – score 9.

Although Cases 4 and 5 are reported as mini cases, they are nonetheless of interest.

Case 4: Sherry was selected as a mini case study rather than a major because, as indicated in Table 4.2, she shared more similarities with her Chinese peers than Rita did:

- Sherry moved from her first degree subject, English, to her second degree subject, Education. Moreover, like the most of her Chinese peers, she had been an English teacher in China for one year.

**Case 5:** Cindy was chosen as a second mini case study because, as Table 4.2 shows, she seemed to have the advantage of prior academic successes. For example,

- she and Tracy (Case 3) were the only two students who had majored in Social Work as undergraduates;
- she had published a journal article during undergraduate study and had been the president of her university's student union;
- because of her outstanding academic performances as an undergraduate, she was the only student in *MSc Education* who had secured a Master's offer in China;
- her English competence and self-regulation had been further boosted and practised through running her own language training school for three months. It had closed before she came to the UK.

The preceding participants' actual experiences will be provided in the each of following case studies. Some words and sentences extracted from students' accounts were underlined according to the researcher's perspective as key to best represent students' perceptions and picture their transitions.

#### **4.4 A major case study on Rita**

##### *Introduction to Rita*

Rita perhaps was the most advantaged student among of all participants in this Programme. This is not only because she had lived independently since her undergraduate degree in Legal English and Law. It is also because when she embarked on her Master's programme, she seemed to be better-placed and more confident than other Chinese students from a similar background about her ability to make rapid and relatively smooth transitions in language, pedagogical culture and level of study. In her words:

I have a good ability of adaptation... my English is good... my spirit is strong... Although I wasn't a student for two years, I'm still capable of learning or even doing better than those who just graduated... (IQ1, 234)

Rita had been an outstandingly successful first-degree student in an average university. Not only was her mastery of English particularly high by the time she graduated, but it had been further boosted by a period working in the British Council in China. Furthermore, Rita had also displayed the breadth of her abilities by successfully founding and managing a company of her own before her Master's learning.

However, surprisingly, Rita's learning journey proved to be challenging in ways which brought with it a degree of disappointment. She in fact found all dimensions of transition challenging and difficult to cope with, because they were interwoven.

##### *Rita's transition in language and transition in subject*

Rita's decreasing confidence was evident in her experience of language transition. While English language became a barrier, lack of subject knowledge also increased her difficulty in coping with subject-specific language. Although initially Rita was confident, or indeed somewhat over-confident, she was surprised when encountering language barriers:

...No matter how high an IELTS score you've got... You have to practise more to be good at listening in the class... (IQ1, 198-200)

Rita realised that her high standard of English competence in China did not mean she was a good English user in the UK. Then she recognised that it was related to the subject matter:

...Even teaching in Chinese, I can't understand. How could I understand when it's taught in English? (IQ1, 238)

Thus she appeared to be neither familiar with the specific knowledge required for the subject she was studying and nor did she have a secure command of the very subject-specific language required to help her learn.

Between Interview 2 and 3, from Rita's perspective, her language transition regressed. It was undoubtedly the case that at this time Rita believed she was actually regressing rather than making progress or remaining the same, because she said:

...they (UK people) know we're not English speakers, so when we're shopping... They use simple words... Previously I supposed my English was good, but now it's getting worse. Teachers speak too fast and their dialects are too strong. Moreover, do you find the score you get doesn't relate to how much you understand the teaching? That's why we usually get distracted from the class. (IQ2, 251-258)

...I may know every single word. But when they compose together as a sentence, I'm lost. (IQ2, 280)

Rita appeared to find using everyday English straightforward, whereas academic language became more difficult to cope with and more likely to influence her confidence. This may be because in China she was familiar with, and was good at communication in everyday English and/or business English, rather than the

academic kind. However, it is reasonable to suggest that, while she did not assume learner autonomy like a Master's student should to make the texts meaningful, she also attributed responsibility for her difficulties extrinsically to external sources – the UK teachers and the Programme's poor assessment design. As she noted above, the assessment did not allow her to demonstrate her understanding.

*Rita's transition in level of study, transition in pedagogical culture and transition in subject*

As the Programme progressed, besides language barriers, Rita's self-esteem was additionally challenged because she was not making the kind of academic progress that she had expected in other transitions – in level of study, pedagogical culture and subject.

In Interview 1, Rita seemed to understand what was expected of her to engage in Master's learning in the UK:

In my mind, [good] teachers should teach you how to fish, but not just give you fishes. Teachers in China give you fish, but wouldn't teach you how to fish... (IQ1, 13-17)

Learning's... something you should learn after the class... (IQ2, 10)

Rita appeared to know 'fishing' was her responsibility. So she was supposed to assume learner autonomy, which was a function of transition in level of study as well as the requirement of western pedagogical culture. However, her comprehension was not secure. She misunderstood, for example, that the teacher was not making a suggestion but rather was giving an instruction:

...Until my British peer told me, I haven't realised the teacher asked me to check reference... If the teacher said you must learn, then I could make sense. (IQ1, 192-194)

It seems that Rita's difficulty of recognising the Programme's requirements was not just because of her language barrier in the linguistic aspect, but also related to her failure to understand communication at a level of pedagogical culture. However, although she was clear about requirements, she was unable to close the gap:

I don't know why this [UK] teacher has given lots of materials but still asks us to

search online... (IQ1, 148)

...it'd be better if the teacher could make every bit of knowledge listed on one sheet. Then we don't need to find it by ourselves. (IQ1, 166)

Assuming learner autonomy seemed to be more complicated in practice for Rita. She appeared to believe that the Master's teachers should teach like her undergraduate teachers. Therefore, although lack of prior subject knowledge and the Master's level of knowledge may be related to Rita's inability of closing the gap, it seems to be more related to her surface-level conception of learning: she maintained the role of an undergraduate student in a Master's learning environment.

As a consequence it was clear from Interviews 2 and 3, that the extent of her learner autonomy remained limited:

...there're lots of famous people coming to give lectures. Why do we never receive emails from our secretary? (IQ3, 95)

It is relatively hard to believe that Rita could not find the information she indicated in the preceding extract on the university webpages. She waited to be informed rather than looking for herself.

While the above discussion has indicated that Rita had difficulties when understanding 'terms of engagement' (a term which will be explored fully in the **Discussion and Implications** chapter) as her Programme demanded, her narrow evolution of 'cultural scripts' was also suggested.

From Rita's perspective, her previous learning experience trained her well to be ready to learn in the style of western pedagogies. This, from the researcher's perspective, may be related to her evolving 'cultural scripts' from Interview 1 when she only thought that group discussion 'impressed' her (IQ1, 17), to Interview 2 when this pedagogy helped her to approach learning through vocalising ideas. In her words,

...When you're explaining your thoughts, your logics practise [you're trying to be logical and argue in a logical way]... And you should make your own ideas logically and plausibly. (IQ2, 24)



Yet her ‘cultural scripts’ appeared to be too narrow to enable her to engage in group discussions. This is because, like many Chinese students (Starr, 2012), Rita actually viewed learning and teaching as fundamentally focused on interaction with teachers. One of indications of this can be found in her reference to seminars as ‘aimless discussions’ (IQ3, 107), and in her comment that ‘teachers rarely offer conclusions’, but instead ‘just say bye-bye after the discussion’ (IQ3, 68-77) suggesting that her learning would not be complete until the teacher had summarised what was to be learnt from the seminar discussion.

Critical thinking was another skill required when learning using western pedagogies. Rita realised this quite late (not until she received the feedback on assignments returned at the beginning of Semester 2) and when she did, how to put it into practice became another challenge. This is because:

It doesn’t mean that all students are like the British students who know how to make a critical review... (IQ2, 48)

Rita’s complaint is in line with other studies: Chinese learners are less likely to have well-developed critical thinking skills compared to their western peers (Chen and Bennett, 2012; Kember, 2001). It further demonstrates that thinking critically was even more crucial at Master’s level than undergraduate level in the UK. This was especially challenging for students like Rita to grasp in the compressed time-frame of a Master’s degree, and since UK university teachers may erroneously assume that students like Rita had already learned how to think critically in their first degrees.

#### *Rita’s performances on practising subject-specific literacies*

As already observed, it is unsurprising that Rita’s awareness and mastery of subject-specific literacies were not sufficient. This is because she was unable to or did not know how to fulfill the key requirements of this Programme. She admitted:

... the teacher asked: ‘Tell me your statement.’ Then I found I didn’t have one... (IQ2, 67)

... My research questions are problematic, which was mentioned by almost every teacher. (IQ3, 121-125)

...I didn’t make conclusions, because... I didn’t know how to make conclusions...

(IQ3, 169)

*Rita's transition in living and learning overseas*

While Rita had academic difficulties, her transition in living and learning overseas was also problematic. This is because she deliberately kept a distance from making friends and interacting with peers between Interviews 1 to 2:

...I don't like to talk with 'children' who're younger than me ... (IQ1, 108)

By Interview 3, Rita did not re-visit this theme. This is because Rita went to China after Interview 3 because she missed home. This was contrary to the researcher's early presumption.

*Summary of Rita's case*

Despite the fact that Rita was advantaged in being an English teacher and having work-related experiences, she had difficulties.

For Rita, the one transition that seemed to present significant challenges was in coping with the demands of postgraduate study. Rita's conception of what it took to succeed at Master's level seemed locked into an undergraduate rather than postgraduate set of expectations. Thus, rather than relishing the opportunity for a much greater measure of self-regulating and reflecting on her learning, (mirroring perhaps the autonomy and initiative she had demonstrated as a businesswoman), she appeared in certain respects to continue to want considerable teacher direction. Therefore the mis-match between what she required and what the Programme called for eventually led to 'destructive friction' (Vermunt and Verloop, 1999). As a result of this situation, Rita seemed to be stuck on a plateau, apparently unable to (or not knowing how to) make onward progress. In Perry's terminology, she seemed to be 'temporising' (Perry, 1970), or perhaps even beginning to 'regress' or 'escape', by attributing her situation to an external source. Alternatively, from the perspective of Welikala and Watkins (2008), her 'cultural scripts' had not evolved sufficiently: she continued to make sense of her experiences as a Master's student in the UK through the lens of a Chinese university undergraduate. And if we adopt instead the conceptual framework of the **Literature Review**, the interpretation might be that

Rita had not developed (or indeed had not be sufficiently supported in developing) the subject-specific literacies called for by this particular Master's programme. When encountering the unclear comprehension of the requirements of Masters' literacies, she avoided interacting with and contacting peers, even her Chinese peers. It seems that her outstanding prior experience in China left her with the belief that she was a very able student. Therefore she would rather learn and live as a 'lone wolf':

[t]he lone wolf is an individual who prefers to work alone, dislikes group process, see others as ineffective and incapable and dismisses the ideas of others. (Feldman Barr et al., 2005, p 88)

## **4.5 A major case study on Zack**

### *Introduction to Zack*

Zack was the oldest and the only male student in the Programme. Compared to the other *MSc Education* research participants, Zack had the least advantageous educational background.

Firstly, compared with other *MSc Education* participants, Zack had a substantial change of subject from Advertising Studies to Education. While most of his Chinese peers had used western pedagogies to learn English as a major and had worked before as full-time English teachers, Zack's first degree included modules on Sketch, Colours and Graphic Artist Design. Moreover, his working experience had been limited to a part-time job to teach Chinese language in a western organisation.

Secondly, as his Interview 1 suggests, he had not been an outstanding undergraduate student and nor had he been a good English speaker. He had failed to win a postgraduate offer in China and he had several attempts to get a qualifying IELTS exam score.

It is therefore not surprising to see from the subsequent analysis that he experienced many challenges during his academic journey. Although he did not report much on his challenges from subject changes, his subject transition undoubtedly regressed. This is because his all transitions – in language, level of study, subject and pedagogical culture – were interwoven and he regressed in a downward spiral.

### *Zack's transitions in language and transition in subject*

At the beginning of the interviews, Zack was challenged by the language barrier. He identified and explained the reasons:

...The first reason is language and the subject language, while the second one is my slow reading speed. I need more time but I have so many modules... (IQ1, 106)

This extract deserves attention, because it suggests that Zack's language barrier was interwoven with his challenges in other transitions. Lack of knowledge in the new

subject increased the challenges he faced with coping with the language barrier, while his problems with English language held back his capacity to gain a secure Master's-level grasp of the new subject.

More interestingly, as this extract further suggests, similar to Rita, to maintain self-worth, Zack seemed to attribute responsibility for his difficulties extrinsically to others. While the Programme's schedule was not commonly considered to be too heavy by other interviewees, Zack defended himself by saying that too many course modules made him too busy to read. He did not say, however that that may have been related to the fact that he was busy with finding jobs. Or, as the researcher suspected, Zack may have been trying to make his attribution reasonable and forgivable in front of the researcher.

Zack reported in Interview 1 that he had recognised that he required additional help with his English, and had taken an external course and also found a language partner with whom he could practise his spoken English. Nonetheless he found the former helper less helpful, because '...they [the language teachers] just left materials and asked me to learn independently...' (IQ1, 166). Conversely, he gained confidence through talking to his language partner. In his words, 'I don't think it's a considerable challenge for students who're not native English speakers...' (IQ2, 112)

However by Interview 3, he found:

English's still my biggest challenge. When I put my thoughts into words, they change... (IQ3, 17)

...I cannot understand what others say and I don't know how to express my ideas. (IQ3, 53)

Zack's regression in language transition may be seen as related to three gaps which he failed to close. First, he seemed to be confused about the gap between everyday language and academic language: his language partner may well have improved his everyday English, but not his grasp of the academic language the Programme required.

Second, he still did not assume responsibility for self-regulating his learning, because rather than reading more (which could have helped to close the gap), he read even less. This will be explored in the following analysis.

Third, the language barrier was actually much more complicated than Zack thought. As the **Literature Review** has noted, language varies across different textual genres and modes. Zack had problems with recognising meanings from others' speech and he experienced problems with choosing the most appropriate form of language to convert his internal thoughts to verbal expression.

Consequently, in Interview 3, although Zack claimed that he had achieved a transition in language and in grasping the language competence required at Master's level, in reality he did not. This was because his shortcomings in language were exacerbated by challenges in other transitions – in level of study, pedagogical culture and subject.

*Zack's transition in level of study and transition in pedagogical culture*

Interviews 1 to 3 suggest that Zack seemed to grasp 'conception of learning' and believed he had the ability the Programme called for:

In the UK, it (teaching) focuses on getting something from the students' side... (IQ1, 2)

A good Master's learner should learn actively and manage time nicely... (IQ1, 146)

...I learnt independently at my undergraduate study... I have this ability. (IQ1, 55)

Actually, however – and like Rita – there seemed to be a significant gap between Zack's emerging grasp of the need for independent learning and his capacity to act autonomously in his day-to-day learning as a Master's student. As he said:

...I should read, but I don't read much. It's less useful for me. My interest's not there. (IQ2, 37-40)

Zack's comprehension of the 'terms of engagement' required of Master's students was not sufficient to enable him take action, but rather than acknowledging responsibility for this, again he attributed his failure to do so to other factors.

Additionally, although his 'conception of learning' and 'cultural scripts' seemed to match what is called for in a western pedagogical culture, actually they did not. This is because while he claimed that '...Teaching needs students to experience and discuss...' (IQ2, 5), he thought this pedagogy was less useful. Given his complaint that the topics discussed were too broad to motivate his learning, it could be suggested that Zack was less likely to listen to others and contribute to the discussion. This may have been related to Zack's prior learning experience, because 'in China... students did not thrive in this communicative environment' (Starr, 2012, p15). So he did not really gain 'cultural scripts' appropriate to the demands of western pedagogical culture and therefore had difficulties in being engaged. It may also be seen as related to his language barrier.

Critical thinking was recognised by Zack in his initial interview as the third requirement that his Programme expected:

My conception about 'critical' isn't my teachers' 'critical' [what my UK teachers understand by critical]: mine is to criticise everything. But what they require is... You couldn't absolutely agree nor disagree with one of them (previous arguments). You should identify weakness and strength. (IQ1, 88)

In other words, his definition of 'critical' and what it meant to respond critically did not match that of his UK teachers. In Interview 1, Zack appeared to recognise the gap: 'being critical' was to weigh something in a more judicious way that took account of strengths and weaknesses.

Zack's understanding of what 'being critical' meant may, the researcher believes, be related to his undergraduate learning experience. On the one hand, it can be explained as pedagogically-culture-specific, which might lead to different conceptualisations of this western-derived concept. On the other hand, 'critical thinking' appeared in Zack's case to be subject-specific and teacher-specific:

...my undergraduate teachers didn't encourage us to read...[because] our original thoughts may be confined... (IQ3, 65)

However, mirroring his difficulties with autonomy in learning, Zack had acquired some appreciation of what was expected, but found it hard to practise:

...I still like to follow others' opinions... My ways of learning are still like what I did in China... (IQ3, 7)

By the time of the third interview, Zack could not help expressing his disappointment in the final interview about his decision to study to come to the UK. He reported that he could not help expressing his disappointment in the final interview about his decision to study to come to the UK.

#### *Zack's performances on practising subject-specific literacies*

Given Zack's frustrations as a Master's student, it is hardly surprising that, from Interview 2, all the comments which teachers gave on Zack's assignments were negative. In his words, '...I thought I did great, but my scores were low...' (IQ2, 72).

Zack's lack of success in writing like an 'insider' (Bartholomae, 1985) is vividly illustrated in his accounts in Interviews 2 and 3 of his difficulties in assignments with understanding methodology, making appropriate reference to evidence, or undertaking a literature review:

...I didn't have methodology, although it's a great part of marking criteria.... (IQ2, 72)

...I lack data to support my opinion... because I don't know how... (IQ3, 49)

Therefore he attributed his difficulties extrinsically again to the poor teaching. Although the course he complained about was concerned precisely with how to reason and argue in forms appropriately to the subject area of Education, Zack was unable to recognise he was being helped.

#### *Summary of Zack's case*



Zack's transitions were challenging and problematic. His case was complicated not only because, from the researcher's perspective, he presented patchy confidence (a mixed feeling of confidence and uncertainty), but also because his transitions regressed in a downward spiral. From the researcher's perspective, it could reasonably be argued that this is related to Zack's surface-level conception of postgraduate learning, or alternatively that his 'cultural script' was still dominated by the Chinese pedagogical culture. Despite the fact that he had seemed to apprehend the gaps, like Rita, he acted as if he was still an undergraduate student: he did not seem to face up to challenges in time and continued to put the main responsibility for learning on the teacher rather than on students like himself. Therefore, later he appeared to find it harder and harder to make changes and find strategies. Looking back, Zack's degree of self-regulation and sense of learner responsibility became increasingly less apparent between Interview 1 and Interview 3. Therefore, from Vermunt and Verloop's perspective (1999), Zack's wish for a high degree of teacher-regulation of learning was incompatible with teachers' expectation of intermediate or high degrees of student-regulated learning. Eventually, his learning journey seemed to end in 'destructive friction' – 'temporising' and ultimately he appeared to be regressing.

Moreover, it was disadvantageous to Zack to have changed subjects. From Hounsell's point of view (1988), he did not capture completely that the requirements of essay writing for *MSc Education* differed greatly from his former subject of Advertising. Although Zack identified that subject-situated literacies required him to have literature review and evidence, he did not fully understand what the role of this key element meant in the writing. Zack was not aware that evidence contributed to make the new conclusion as authoritative as possible. He did not do well on 'finding evidence', let alone 'figure out what can be used as evidence' (Bizzell, 2009, p.147). Zack kept receiving negative feedback between Interviews 2 and 3, which may be related to the fact that he did not do what he ought to do. Or it may also be that Zack did not interpret the feedback and respond to it as appropriately as his teachers expected. Therefore, he wrote 'assume[ing] privilege without having any' (Bartholomae, 1985, p.461).

Moreover, lacking sufficient knowledge about the English language, he was unable to find out that the language he was required to improve and practise was ‘the “School” quality, the “Edited” quality of this English that contributes to users’ credibility’ (Bizzell, 2009, p.140). Nevertheless, subject-specific literacies were much more complex than this. For example, consistent with the findings of Lea and Street’s study (2006), Zack’s case shows that he had difficulties when he tried to shift across different modes of meaning representation, such as speaking, reading, listening and thinking.

## **4.6 A major case study on Tracy**

### *Introduction to Tracy*

Although Tracy came from a high-ranking university in China, she believed that in her first degree – Social Work – she was not offered high-quality teaching. Instead, she gained a sense of achievement from the fact that she had a talent for drawing and from her ability to read independently:

...[At my undergraduate study] I read e-books just because I want to know... (IQ1, 14)

Because Tracy was a ‘big-city girl’, she felt she had an advantage over her peers who came from small towns. Therefore she believed she had little to learn from peers and even teachers.

Additionally, Tracy’s strong confidence in her ability to perform her Master’s learning well was also gained from her higher IELTS score (score 9) and slighter subject change compared to her Chinese peers:

...I had a slight change of subject. I’ve learnt the most difficult knowledge, like SPSS... It makes a big difference between me and others. (IQ1, 38)

Finally, as Tracy had relatives who had studied overseas, she knew what was expected of her in learning in western countries. In her words, ‘...UK teachers expect individual contribution ...’ (IQ1, 67).

However, Tracy did not expect she had a different story.

### *Tracy’s transition in language*

Tracy’s transition in language regressed. She was unable to cope with the challenges of subject-specific language and discourses, and especially with academic writing. This is because she realised that the advantages of English competence and prior subject knowledge were not sufficient to meet the expectations of the Programme:

Writing in English should be challenging... Now I just realise the textbook English [learnt in China] and the English used here [in the UK] are different...

And my previous knowledge regarding subject terminologies can't apply to Education... So I have to understand the text meaning [of subject terminologies], then go to do critical thinking from the philosophical perspective. It's so hard... (IQ1, 79-80)

Tracy also encountered difficulties with subject transition, even though the change of subject made was relatively slight. This may be also be related to Tracy's language barrier: the mis-match between the English taught in China and the real English (scholarly English and subject discourse) encountered in the UK led to difficulties when she tried to associate the new subject knowledge with her existing knowledge.

However, this did not appear to improve from Interview 1 to 2, because she said:

...It's an old problem... Although I'm familiar with this knowledge...[and] I can recognise every single word, I can't understand the whole sentence. I have to read to handle, although it's not my job [I understand that independent reading would help me to improve, but at the same time did not see this as my responsibility].' (IQ2, 74)

Instead, it became harder to overcome, because she seemed reluctant to assume learner responsibility to cope with it. Thus similar to Rita, Tracy was reluctant to assume learner autonomy to come to her own understanding of Master's-level texts. This is because, from Tracy's perspective, it was 'not her job' – which of course raises the following question: whose responsibility was it?

It seems that in Interview 1 she found an effective coping strategy: reading the texts in Chinese before then reading them in English. Nevertheless, this introduced additional difficulties when she tried to connect these two language texts:

...Quite often, I'm confused about why this term/word [the Chinese text] is translated in this way [the English text]?! (IQ2, 74)

In Interview 2, Tracy's earlier prediction about her writing proficiency became an actual problem. This aspect of subject-specific literacies seemed to be more challenging than Tracy used to think. This appeared to frustrate her:

...I never realised my English was so poor. I can't handle it, so I try not to make grammar errors... (IQ2, 62-64)

...Glossary can't be enriched by speaking. I have to memorize English vocabulary. Because I'm quite lazy, I only learn a few new English words, less than ten... But people can understand each other. I describe things... (IQ2, 69-72)

It is clear that academic writing was the most challenging language barrier for Tracy, compared to other language demands at this level (such as reading, listening and speaking). She thought that to improve her academic writing only required her to correct grammar mistakes. However apparently it was more complicated than this. She recognised the need to broaden vocabularies, but it appears that, like Rita and Zack, Tracy attributed the main reason and the responsibility extrinsically. Even worse, to maintain self-esteem, she deluded herself that this shortcoming could be overcome by describing things.

More evidence that she was struggling with language transitions emerged from Interview 3, when she reported that 'Surprisingly, it (my English competence) doesn't improve at all...' (IQ3, 36). This, taken with her decreasing levels of confidence in her other transitions, was inextricably linked to her overall sense that she was not doing well and that her experience of transition in each area was completely interwoven.

#### *Tracy's transition in level of study and transition in pedagogical culture*

Overall, the more she attributed responsibility extrinsically, the faster Tracy's confidence dropped and this was particularly evident as she navigated her way through the transitions in level of study and pedagogical culture.

In Interview 1, Tracy seemed to understand what was required of her with regard to Master's level learning:

...Undergraduate students are teenagers... But postgraduate students have been grown-ups. They've gained independent learning capability as well as basic knowledge. So teachers should function as guides and won't tell [conclusions/findings] directly... It's the learners' job to look for these. (IQ1, 4)

...Most important is how you propose your arguments rather than others. I have some ideas, but I don't know how to express them. (IQ1, 66)

However, it seems that engaging in critical thinking was not a straightforward matter for Tracy and was considerably more challenging than she had anticipated, despite the fact that she understood that she should think critically and felt that she already had critical thoughts.

What Tracy indicated in these extracts about the distinctiveness of postgraduate learning was indeed accurate – as far as it went. However, although she mentioned the requirement to make a critical contribution three times in Interview 1 (IQ1, 67 on page 144; IQ1, 79-80 on page 144, IQ1, 66 on page 146), she did not mention it in the later phases of her interviews and she did not mention other Master's requirements (such as providing evidence and argumentation). She was silent about the need for high quality learning at Master's level and according to the preceding extract (IQ1, 14 on page 143), she learned only for interest. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Tracy had a narrow definition of learning: Master's learning to Tracy was more like learning knowledge in a quantitative sense (only seeking 'a quantitative increase in knowledge'), which is just basic understanding (S äj ö 1979).

Moreover to explain her failure, she was more willing and found it easier to attribute her learner duty and failure of coping with difficulties to extrinsic sources:

...the teacher doesn't understand what's going on in China... [Then] why should I be bothered to explain? (IQ3, 54)

As the current researcher observed, given Tracy's strong or even over-confidence indicated previously, she built 'castle walls' to maintain her self-esteem, which led her to maintain the erroneous view that she was still a 'successful' student in the UK. It is clear from her transcripts that she always compared her advantage with dis-advantages of her Master's peers', especially when she talked about her subject transition in Interview 1 (IQ1, 38, page 151) and Interview 2:

...I read my [Chinese] peer's dissertation proposal, which plans to invent questionnaire and interview... I've learnt this subject for four undergraduate years and I can't even do it. How could they possibly do it after only several weeks of Master's learning? (IQ2, 32)

Tracy seemed to believe that prior knowledge was the most influential factor which decided whether a student could succeed on the Programme. Intriguingly, she realised later that what she perceived as her advantage in fact did not help her to succeed. In contrast, the Chinese peers who in Tracy's eyes would never be successful showed better subject literacies in their assignments. Tracy evidently had difficulties confronting and accepting the fact that rather than making steady progress she was in fact regressing; ironically she attributed the cause for this extrinsically again:

...I'm the only person who wasn't coming from an English major... (IQ3, 63)

*Tracy's performance on practising subject-specific literacies*

Tracy's confidence diminished between Interviews 1 and 3 as a direct result of the difficulties she faced with the transitions discussed above. However, of particular importance to this decline in her confidence were the problems she encountered with meeting the academic literacy demands of Master's study.

After Semester 1, which concluded with the first assessed writing component, she was confident and thought that there were no differences between writing requirements at undergraduate level in China and those at postgraduate level in the UK. However, by Interview 3 (Semester 2), when MSc students finished the second writing component, there is clear evidence that her confidence had dropped significantly. In contrast to what she had thought previously, she argued that academic writing in the UK was more challenging:

...you must have expectations about what you'll achieve after learning this course. But in the last semester, my expectations were out of control: for some assignments, I thought I did great, but I got really really low scores. Contrarily, for some I didn't feel good about, I got high scores. In this new semester, it's even more out-of-control... (IQ3, 2)

...The secretary said usually we'd get better scores in Semester 2 than Semester 1. But my scores in Semester 2 were much worse than before... (IQ3, 56)

It is clear from the preceding accounts when Tracy reflected on her achievement, that as her mastery of subject literacies regressed, her sense of certainty (in her word –

‘control’) about the requirements of particular subject literacies decreased between Semester 1 and 2.

It is worth considering why. In Interview 1, like Zack, Tracy did not realise that her UK teachers were attempting to help her to write in the Education-conventional way. Instead, she commented on this tutorial discussion as poor and meaningless, like a ‘talk show’ (IQ1, 58).

Moreover, she did not recognise that her poor skills in self-regulation ability contributed to worsening practices:

...In the last semester, I only took two weeks to prepare an assignment and used three to four days on writing. Although the time’s quite tight, I still got a good score. This [delay of doing work] made my capabilities improved and enhanced... (IQ2, 12)

This can also be shown in Interview 3, when she attributed responsibility to ‘Procrastination’ and claimed this was common to all the students (IQ3, 26-28). Regardless of whether she really thought in this way, or whether she was trying to provide a reasonable excuse for her failure to become an effective Master’s student, her confidence and sense of learner responsibility were not as she portrayed them. In contrast, they were decreasing.

By the end of the teaching component, it is evident that Tracy did not understand the expectations of the Programme and her confidence reached rock bottom, because she was increasingly willing to forgive herself for her failure to self-regulate learning and unable to appropriately reflect on the consequence of her failure. In her words: ‘...I read a good student’s assignment. I thought her writing was nonsense, but she got the right format...’ (IQ3, 52).

Tracy appeared to learn like a ‘lone wolf’ (Feldman Barr et al., 2005, p. 88): like Rita, she did not think she could learn from reading her peers’ work. However, even worse, she did not accept the teachers’ feedback:

...The teacher said the most important thing was that I didn’t make comparisons between cases in China and those in the UK... But why do I have to make comparisons? ...I don’t really know how to write a good assignment... (IQ3, 56)



The preceding extract captures neatly that fact that by this point in her studies Tracy was completely lost, had lost confidence and appeared simply to have given up. She could not understand the requirement of making comparisons in her writing as a way to develop critical thinking and decided simply to ignore the teacher's advice.

#### *Summary of Tracy's case*

As noted above, Tracy's key transitions – in level of study, language and pedagogical culture were tightly interwoven and difficulties in one led to an immediate and negative impact on each of the others. In particular, her difficulty with the main transition for her – transition in level of study – resulted in a crisis of identity for her as a Master's student and in her crisis of confidence. Consequently, her Master's journey reflected a downward spiral: the more new coping strategies she found ineffective, the quicker she lost sense of certainty and the more difficulty she had meeting the required 'conception of learning' and 'cultural scripts' demanded on the Programme.

Like Rita, attributing blame extrinsically and learning like a 'lone wolf' were apparently more and more important to Tracy's journey of acquiring subject literacies, which was seen as related to an increasing loss of their confidence: along with their decreasing academic literacies, the faster their confidence dropped, the more they were willing to attribute the causes to others. However, even worse than Rita, when Tracy was unable to assume learner responsibility to become a self-regulative learner, her self-reflection on the consequence of her failure when compared to her peers was not only undermined, but going in an inappropriate direction. Self-reflecting one's own learning to Tracy was not to detect her shortcomings to better self-regulate future learning. She used it mainly to self-defend. This led in a further drop and made her confidence and learning journey from which she was able to recover.

## **4.7 A mini case study on Sherry**

### *Introduction to Sherry*

Sherry had worked in China as a full-time English school teacher for two years since 2007 when she graduated at an average-ranking university away from her hometown with a bachelor degree with English as her major. With an average IELTS score (6.5), she came to the UK.

Analysis of Sherry's case demonstrates that transition in level of study was more significant to her than transition in subject. Moreover, as the year progressed, it became clear that her transitions were inextricably interwoven, with challenges in one area having an obvious impact on each of the other transitions.

### *Sherry's transition in level of study, transition in subject and her performance on practising academic literacies*

Between Interviews 1 and 3, Sherry demonstrated an increasing awareness of what was expected of her to fulfil the demands of learning at Master's level. For example, in Interview 1, she recognised that more independent research was required at postgraduate level in the UK than was required for her previous undergraduate learning in China. This smooth progression had a positive impact on how she coped with challenges caused by other transitions (for example in pedagogical culture, language and subject).

After Interview 1, as her independent learning improved, Sherry's understandings about what autonomous learning precisely meant in practice also developed:

...there're so many interesting course modules... It's good to attend some according to interests and for some particular purposes... I've made use of this from this semester (Semester 2)... (IQ2, 12)

Sherry evidently understood what being a self-regulative learner meant at this higher level of academic study: students working at Master's level should self-regulate by decisions concerning their learning and autonomous learning should not only occur when students had a personal interest in the topic. Additionally, a good Master's

learner was someone who could engage in critical thinking, which in her view was another fundamental requirement of the Master's level of learning:

...You should explore more and deeper based on the previous studies to find something new and problems to improve. (IQ2, 11)

Similar to her developing understandings about learner autonomy, Sherry's view about the concept of critical thinking and its demands also developed. As the interviews progressed, she came to recognise the reasons she encountered challenges in practising critical thinking: in Interview 1 she believed that her change of subject inhibited her critical thinking. However later, she developed a more nuanced understanding: critical thinking was additionally challenging in terms of how to practise and do it well. In her words:

Although you're learning hard to do critical thinking expected by (UK) teachers, it's still challenging to do it appropriately and knit it together with what you've read. That's why a lot of my peers felt ok before the assignment submission but got bad scores... (IQ2, 38)

Furthermore, Sherry was also conscious of the need for empirical research. In Sherry's words '...the (Master's) dissertation requires you to do research. (Now) I've got this concept...' (IQ2, 55).

As has been demonstrated, in comparison to other Education participants, Sherry was aware that her writing should satisfy the literacy requirements of writing about Education at Master's level. Not only did she grasp that she was required to do independent empirical research, but she also understood the requirement to use and demonstrate appropriate subject-specific 'ways of thinking and practising' (Hounsell, 2005). Unsurprisingly, she ended her Programme with smooth transitions in level of study and subject.

While critical thinking has been indicated as having a significant impact on Sherry's two key transitions – level of study and subject, it also influenced her ability to respond to the pedagogical culture that she encountered in seminars and lectures – learning through interaction. It is to this that attention will now turn.

### *Sherry's transition in pedagogical culture*

In the teaching-learning environment in the UK critical thinking is important not only in academic writing, but also in teacher-student and peer interactions.

Sherry claimed that her undergraduate study had helped her to understand that:

...communicating with someone doesn't mean you're losing something. [Contrarily] You'll know more. (IQ1, 43)

However, the impact of this prior experience on her UK learning was limited. She admitted that, in her opinion, some of her teachers in China did not want their students to criticise them and this behaviour was regarded as rudeness. Accordingly, she found it challenging to be brave enough to interact with teachers in the UK. Therefore progressing to Interview 2, in contrast to western students who 'like[ed] to interrupt teachers to ask questions actively', she was one of the Chinese students who 'prefer[ed] sitting there, listening and asking questions after the class' (IQ2, 42).

It appears that until Interview 2, her previous learning experiences and Chinese values still had a significant influence on her. So she still encountered psychological barriers to engaging in interactions. Additionally, these barriers may have been associated with her limited language competence.

This challenge was no longer evident in Sherry's third interview. This may be because she may have conquered the psychological barrier and language barrier. Or, it may be the case that as she was heading into the dissertation phase, she was only required to interact with her supervisors rather than discuss and argue in front of all her peers.

### *Summary of Sherry's case*

The previous discussion demonstrates that Sherry's transitions progressed fairly unproblematically. In comparison to her Chinese peers, she experienced a much smoother and sequential progression in her learning journey as a Master's student. While she had not had the advantage of prior subject knowledge, she succeeded in her Programme. This is because, as Vermunt and Verloop (1999) would argue, her

self-regulative learning in practice and her more sophisticated understanding of academic literacies were congruent with the demands of the Programme.

#### **4.8 A mini case study on Cindy**

##### *Introduction to Cindy*

Cindy's first visit to Edinburgh was also her first experience of living away from her parents and her boyfriend.

She had been a successful undergraduate student both in terms of being the president of the student union and having published an academic journal article. These had allowed her to successfully secure a place on a Master's programme in the same university – a top-ranked university in China. But she gave up this opportunity in favour of coming to the UK.

Because of the close relationship between her first degree, Social Work, and this Programme, *Education*, like Tracy, Cindy believed that her prior learning experiences would help her Master's journey, not only because of the similarity in background knowledge required but with regard to the subject literacies required:

...I see things more objectively, but people who took Literature see differently.  
(IQ1, 8)

It was also her opinion that the pedagogical culture she had previously experienced in China (a combination of lectures and group discussions) was similar to that in the UK.

Furthermore, although her IELTS score was average, Cindy believed her English competence was already very good. This had allowed her to become an English teacher in a language training school after her undergraduate graduation in 2008, and this working experience had encouraged her to self-regulate and self-manage a language school of her own.

However, despite all of her advantages, four transitions were found to be significant to Cindy – transitions in language, living and studying overseas, level of study and pedagogical culture. The researcher observed that Cindy's transitions were interwoven, which made the challenges she encountered with learning overseas

harder to overcome and, although they undermined her confidence, Cindy eventually survived and coped well with them.

*Cindy's transition in language and transition in living and studying overseas*

In Interview 1, the recurring theme in Cindy's transcript was the language barrier, in her words '...Language is a real big problem. I thought it was the subject matter, actually it's not...' (IQ1, 2; 14; 16). This undermined her confidence:

I'm the least capable student. They (my Chinese peers) don't have language problems. My first subject has a lot in common with Education... (But the knowledge of Education) You don't necessarily have learnt before [But a 'good' student in Education doesn't require extensive prior subject knowledge]... (IQ1, 49)

...My advantage in China was language, but now I lose it... I don't have confidence... They (my Chinese peers) believe they can handle, but I don't... I feel sad if I shop alone... (IQ1, 113)

In Cindy's opinion, having prior subject knowledge did not help her to learn a similar discipline in the UK in any significant way. And the language barrier became a real problem to her, which resulted in loss of confidence, panic and an inability to experience any sense of achievement. These negative feelings generated by Cindy's academic experiences seemed to impact on her experience of living for the first time independently away from her family (transition in living and studying overseas).

The language barriers became more evident when she encountered the western-favoured pedagogies:

...This teaching method is called brain storm, which is supposed to generate critical thinking through interaction with peers. But I can't understand them, so I can't have my critical thinking and I'm unable to let others know my ideas... (IQ1, 16)

Although Cindy's understanding of 'conceptions of learning' situated within a western pedagogical culture on a theoretical level was evident, nevertheless in practice she found the language barriers inhibited her engagement.

Furthermore, similar to Rita and Tracy, Cindy found it challenging to make sense of text:

...I learnt this knowledge before, so I know what this book teaches. But teaching this in English is different from teaching this in Chinese... (IQ1, 59)

In comparison to Rita and Tracy whose learner autonomy from the researcher's perspective was limited to making texts meaningful, Tracy's difficulty could be seen as more related to her language barrier itself. This is because Cindy was aware that the main source of her language barrier was the academic language – the subject discourses.

The language barrier became less problematic and challenging to Cindy in the following two phases of interviews, because the recurring theme in her Interview 2 transcript was 'I thought it was the language barrier, but it's not...' (IQ2, 11; 14, 18; 30; 114). This is because after the first component of assignment writing, she found that:

...How much I can write depends on how much I understand this knowledge. It's not only the language. I can cope with the language barrier by googling and checking dictionary... (IQ2, 14)

It appears that the higher level of knowledge at the Master's level became more challenging than the language barrier. This may be also associated with Cindy's improvement in English competence, which in her opinion increased her confidence.

Although in Interview 3 Cindy was suffering because she had broken up with her boyfriend, her re-emerging confidence was not only due to her improvement in her transition in language. It was also because she felt rewarded having survived her other transitions – in level of study and pedagogical culture.

*Cindy's transition in level of study, transition in pedagogical culture and her performances on practising subject-specific literacies*

In Interview 1, with the help of her boyfriend who was a Master's student in China, Cindy realised that the level of Master's learning required greater learner autonomy. Although in theory she seemed to agree with this need and thought it was more crucial in the western pedagogical culture, the transcript of Interview 2 shows that she did not quite comprehend and put it fully in practice:

...Why does he just leave a few readings? Or why can't he give us a summary. We can read that... (IQ2, 60)



Cindy came to recognise that there was a gap between her ability to recognise what were the expectations of the Programme and her ability to take appropriate action to close that gap. In other words, she did not grasp the demands of Master's level study.

...This course is tough and makes me tired... I took notes about the teacher's steps of running SPSS...but I don't know why (the teacher decided to take this step)... (IQ2, 52)

Despite difficulties, Cindy proposed that all her assignments were scored higher compared to other participants. Her improved comprehension and mastery of subject literacies can be shown from her accounts in Interview 2 when her main worry was 'plagiarising myself, as I write the same topic from different perspectives...' (IQ2, 79)

In Interview 3, she had a more comprehensive and sophisticated understanding to subject literacies:

To do a good assignment, you should be very clear about your topic and how it's based on previous theories... (You should) explain the research rationale with why this research question's proposed, why this method's used and conducted and your considerations of ethical issues... You should explain the contribution of your research to this field and the gap that your research will fill in... (IQ3, 108)

Based on the above analysis, it is worth asking why between Interviews 1 and 2 Cindy did not seem to take sufficient learner autonomy and her 'conception of learning' still seemed to demand the teachers' direction, yet she demonstrated impressive academic achievement on subject-specific literacies. The reason can be found through her transcripts from Interview 1 to 3.

According to the transcript of Interview 1, Cindy talked about her communication with the teachers. This theme occurs more often in the second interview than in the first:

...I went to talk with her (a lecturer)... I think it's better to talk with teachers...  
So I had a chat with another teacher... (IQ2, 90-92, c. f. IQ2, 10)

... I got the feedback to my assignments, but it's not enough. So I went to check my original copies... and found no more comments on the page margins... I think their feedback is useful. They thought my assignments were good, and then the next time I will keep writing in this way... (IQ2, 102)

Cindy's coping strategy was indicated: she liked to respond to challenges actively by talking with her teachers. As suggested in Cindy's accounts, communication not only helped her teachers to understand the Chinese culturally-specific cases which she would like to write as an essay topic. It also helped Cindy to minimize the gap between how her teachers interpreted the feedback and her interpretation and this scaffolded Cindy to self-reflect and self-regulate her subsequent learning.

As a consequence, Cindy noted she made a transition not only with regard to autonomous learning, but also in journeying to be an independent person in the society:

...Previously, I really liked to rely on someone. In China, we peers grouped together and did homework together... But here (in the UK), you should interact with your teachers. It's up to you to do it or not... My independence's been cultivated like a habit along with the overseas learning progresses. (IQ3, 14)

#### *Summary of Cindy's case*

As indicated above, Cindy's transitions did not progress and develop sequentially from Interview 1 to 3: the analysis suggests that Cindy's 'terms of engagement' and her 'conception of learning' called for by the postgraduate study developed from a 'temporising' plateau to a growth (Perry, 1981). This progression of 'conceptions of learning' from the quantitative term (seeking for accumulating knowledge) to the qualitative term (looking for interpreting knowledge) (Säljö, 1979) facilitated her in progressing in other transitions – in pedagogical culture and in language. For example, she coped with the language barrier successfully. Moreover, her 'cultural script' was well-developed and she was more willing to engage in learning by interaction. Therefore her subject literacies were developing and her good mastery of subject literacies brought her personal growth. In other words, her intellectual growth not only helped her survival from the crisis of confidence. It also contributed to her smooth transition in living and learning overseas.

#### **4.9 Conclusion: MSc Education**

This part will draw together findings from these five cases and highlight emerging themes, which were particular to the experience of Chinese students enrolled in the MSc programme of Education.

##### *Comparisons within the MSc Education in terms of transition in language*

###### *a) the pervasive challenge of language*

All interviewees experienced challenges with their transitions in language, irrespective of their language proficiency gained from their previous learning and working experiences. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that although they had satisfied the Programme's language entry requirement, this was not sufficient for them to perform well when learning on the Programme.

However, apart from Zack, all interviewees came with a relatively high level of language competence, which enabled them to identify the required kind of English and where they needed to improve.

###### *b) the challenge of language in interaction with teachers and peers*

All participants were challenged with using English in interactions with their teachers and peers. This includes two modes of literacies – listening and speaking, which were believed by participants to be interwoven: failures in processing the meanings of what their UK teachers and western peers said held back participants' development of criticality and competence of transmitting messages to others (for example, Cindy, Tracy and Zack). Therefore the language problem created a psychological barrier to talk (for example, Sherry). Moreover, failure to communicate at a cultural level undermined students' understandings of the Programme's requirements (for example Rita). Consequently, it can be argued that

the transition in language becomes more important and influential, when taken together with the transition in pedagogical culture.

### *c) the challenge of subject-situated language*

All the participants, apart from Sherry, reported that their deficient knowledge of subject-situated language constrained their understanding of subject knowledge. Even for Cindy and Tracy, who had had prior subject knowledge, still found difficulties in understanding the subject-situated language. Hence, when these two aspects of academic practice seemed to be mutually interconnected, it seems to make gaining knowledge of the subject-situated language more complicated and difficult. Leaving aside the fact that they also lacked autonomy in learning, this was particularly the case with the students who had had great subject changes (for example, Rita and Zack). Accordingly, it can be proposed that difficulties in transition in language seemed for these students to compound the challenges they experienced in transitions in subject and in level of study.

Compared to academic writing, three modes of academic literacies – listening, speaking and reading in the subject-situated language – immediately frustrated all the participants at the start of their Master's learning journey. They were so substantially influential that in Interview 1 some of these students (for example Zack and Cindy) viewed it as their biggest challenge. Later however they found it was not, as they made some improvements in English to various extents as a result of practising. However, academic writing was reported as the problem which remained unsolved at the end of the Programme.

### *d) the challenges in writing in academic English*

Finally and equally importantly, writing in English was challenging not only because the students were required to write in their second language, but also because they were required to write in scholarly language and the subject-situated language: on the one hand, they were challenged by practising scholarly language which was different from the everyday language or the language taught in China. On the other hand, as

the **Literature Review** shows, writing was subject-situated, which means that the students were expected to write in the subject-specific conventional ‘ways of thinking and practising’ (Hounsell and McCune, 2005). This suggests that students’ transition in language was interwoven with their subject transition.

### *Comparisons within the MSc Education in terms of transition in level of study*

#### *e) the influence of change of subject on the level of study*

Compared to students who changed subjects, the students who had learned in a similar disciplinary community (for example, Cindy and Tracy) were more able to realise the different levels of knowledge between the Master’s level and the undergraduate level.

#### *f) the influence of conceptions of learning and the challenges of level of study*

The fundamental factor which is more likely to result in progression or regression in other dimensions of transition and the extent of comprehending and mastering subject literacies is how the students conceive of learning. More exactly, no matter how well someone can regulate their undergraduate learning, and the extent of their prior working experience (for example Rita), as long as their conceptions of learning were still constrained as a quantitative term (seeking the accumulative knowledge) they would be less likely to engage in Master’s learning effectively. Although they may grasp the ‘terms of engagement’, their limited comprehension caused them to plateau when learning on the Programme. Furthermore, if they were less likely to take an appropriate reflective approach to self-regulate their actual learning performance, they may be more likely to attribute their own perceived failures to others in an effort to maintain their self-esteem (for example Rita, Tracy and Zack). This would finally result in ‘retreat’ (Perry, 1981).

*g) the influence of reflective approach and self-regulation on the challenge of level of study*

Regardless of whether or how well they had self-regulated their learning as well as prior working, if students failed to comprehend ‘conception of learning’ and ‘terms of engagement’ in Master’s learning, their other dimensions of transition hindered and constrained their mastery of subject literacies.

*Comparisons within the MSc Education in terms of transition in subject*

*h) the subject challenge and subject discourses*

Students whose first degree and the Master’s subject were the same or very similar (for example, Tracy and Cindy) tended not to experience the subject dimension as challenging. However, they were still challenged by understanding the specific subject discourses in English. This interweaving of subject and language transitions, unsurprisingly, became much more challenging to the students who had completely changed subjects (for example Rita and Zack). They encountered challenges not only with new vocabulary, but also with what that vocabulary meant within the subject area concerned.

The only exception – Sherry – who did not report difficulties with learning unfamiliar knowledge nevertheless admitted that the unfamiliar knowledge hindered her understanding of the new knowledge. Therefore she had difficulty engaging in critical thinking based on a secure understanding of the new knowledge. Consequently, as was the case with Rita and Zack, Cindy was also challenged with learning new subject knowledge.

### *Comparisons within the MSc Education in terms of transition in pedagogical culture*

Besides points which have already been noted in sections *g*) and *h*), it is worthwhile noticing some additional significant themes regarding students' transition in pedagogical culture.

#### *i) interaction and discussion are key pedagogical approaches in western culture*

It is difficult to anticipate how Chinese students will experience transitions when they encounter western pedagogies. Although some students (for example Sherry and Rita) had experienced western culture in China, they still encountered challenges with respect to understanding socio-cultural language (Rita) and lacking confidence to speak English in front of their peers. This is perhaps easier to understand with Cindy. This may be because she had not been used to speaking English as an everyday language during her undergraduate experience.

Regardless of whether they came from an environment where western-pedagogies were used (Rita), or from a similar disciplinary community (Tracy), or from a substantially different disciplinary learning experience (Zack), they all had problems with how to 'learn by interaction'. This meant that they may have been unable to benefit fully from their learning experiences in the UK, where this is a central feature of the pedagogical approach. This lack of comprehension furthermore weakened their willingness to be engaged in interaction, which became a vicious circle for them.

In addition, as a result of the over-confidence displayed in Interviews I and 2, both Rita and Tracy isolated themselves from their peers in both their academic and social lives.

Finally, in terms of the gap between Chinese culturally-specific topics and topics from other cultural backgrounds, Cindy and Tracy responded differently: while

Cindy assumed greater learner autonomy to minimize the gap of UK and Chinese pedagogical cultures, Tracy thought this was the teachers' responsibility.

*j) critical thinking*

The challenges that the students faced with critical thinking proved to be more complex than previous research has suggested. Although each of participants realised that Master's-level work required critical thinking, they all reported difficulties with how to do/practise it. As noted in the **Literature Review**, in their prior learning experiences within Chinese pedagogical culture Chinese learners accept what is in books and what teachers say quite uncritically. One student – Zack admitted that he liked to follow others' arguments in academic readings. Furthermore, the language barrier constrained the students and they were reluctant to voice their critical thoughts. In Cindy's case for example, as mentioned above, this formed a psychological barrier which prevented her from being willing to speak in front of her peers.

*Comparisons within the MSc Education in terms of living and learning overseas*

Regardless of whether they had had experience of living away from home (Rita), or did not have this experience (Cindy), it seems that they all suffered loneliness to some extent. However, while Cindy survived and her self-confidence returned, Rita and Tracy's unpleasant transitions in pedagogical culture resulted in their isolation in living and learning in the UK.



# Findings from the MSc Signal Processing and Communications

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter begins with a brief outline of the *MSc Signal Processing and Communications* Programme in which six research participants were registered. This is followed by a brief introduction to each of the participants, and the reasons for selecting them as either a major or a minor case study. Each individual case is then discussed. The chapter concludes by drawing together emerging themes.

### **5.2 Introduction to MSc Signal Processing and Communications (SPC)**

The *MSc Signal Processing and Communications (SPC)* sits in the School of Engineering which is part of the College of Science and Engineering at the University of Edinburgh. All six of the research participants enrolled on this Programme were studying on a one-year full time basis and were all made unconditional offers by the university. The average IELTS score of the group was 6.5. None of the participants scored lower than 6 in each of four IELTS components (reading, speaking, listening and writing).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, this Programme can be characterised as a ‘hard applied’ discipline. Table 5.1 outlines the Programme design and methods of teaching and assessing. As Table 5.1 demonstrates, the main purpose of the Programme was to train students to become qualified to work in a wide range of industries, such as Communications and Radar and Signal Processing. The Programme used a combination of different forms of teaching. While all courses with the exception of two MATLAB (matrix laboratory) course modules, used face-to-face lectures and

		<i>MSc Signal Processing and Communications (SPC)</i>
<b>Knowledge and understanding students are expected to gain from the Master's programme</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• familiarity with and thorough understanding of fundamental principles and theories;</li> <li>• using real-world system examples to demonstrate their practical application;</li> <li>• using standard mathematical methods to model, analyse and describe digital communication systems;</li> <li>• Formulating solutions to problems in MATLAB.</li> </ul>
<b>Course modules (all compulsory courses)</b>	<b>Semester 1</b>	Discrete-Time Signal Analysis; Digital Communication Fundamentals; Statistical Signal Processing; Image Processing; Signal Processing with MATLAB.
	<b>Semester 2</b>	Adaptive Signal Processing; Advanced Digital Communications; Array Processing Methods; Advanced Concepts in Signal Processing; Image Processing with MATLAB.
<b>Programme structure</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A total 180 credits in one academic year.</li> <li>• The taught component: 60 credits for each semester (total 120 credits).</li> <li>• Project and Thesis: 60 credits.</li> </ul>
<b>Forms of teaching and learning</b>		A combination of lecture, tutorial and practicals in the computer lab.
<b>Methods of assessment</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The taught component: One final-term exam in each course module, except the two course modules about MATLAB.</li> <li>• The research project component: A research project with a Master's thesis to describe the project.</li> </ul>

**Table 5.1** The details of the *MSc SPC*

tutorials supervised by lecturers and/or PhD students, one course in Semester 1 – Image Processing – provided video teaching remotely by a lecturer based at another university. In comparison to other courses on the Programme, the two courses related to MATLAB valued student contributions more highly.

Students graduating from this Programme were expected to be able to relate theory to practical applications. They were also expected to be skilled in the use of mathematical calculations and statistics to solve problems, including using MATLAB to solve problems and generate results quickly and efficiently.

The Programme comprised two components – the taught component with final term exams (22 September to 18 December, 2009 and 11 January to 28 March, 2010) and

the final component with a research project and a Master's dissertation. Each Semester 1 course provided general and fundamental knowledge, while courses in Semester 2 provided greater depth and focus. Students in the 2009-10 session did not have optional courses to choose from; nor could they select courses from other Programmes.

Two examination periods were arranged: mid-December 2009 in Semester 1 and at the end of March 2010 in Semester 2. Different methods of assessment were designed according to the nature and focus of each course. The main assessment method was one final-term closed-book exam for all but three courses. The two MATLAB courses (*Distributing* in Semester 1 which was at a basic level followed by *Extending* in Semester 2 which was at an advanced level), assessed students by means of a manual experiment in the computer lab and a lab-book where students noted their ways of thinking when solving problems and the challenges they encountered during this process. The third course, *Statistical Signal Processing* (in Semester 1), assessed students by means of a final-term open-book exam.

Although the Programme Handbook states that the dissertation should begin following successful completion of Semester 2, in reality students began meeting their dissertation supervisors after finishing Semester 1 exams. Students in this Programme were the first of the three groups to begin working on the final dissertation. The deadline for submitting the dissertation was similar to that of the other two programmes.

### **5.3 Justification for the selection of the major and minor case studies**

To provide a rich and nuanced picture of how the *MSc SPC* students experienced their overseas learning, findings will be presented as a combination of major and minor case studies. Table 5.2 provides details of the six research participants' previous experiences in China before coming to the UK; their English level; previous learning experience of using the western pedagogies; their undergraduate subjects;

experience of living away from their families; the ranking of their undergraduate university in China; and any working experience prior to starting their postgraduate study.

Partici- pants	Gender	Level of English		Experienced western teaching and learning approaches		Whether studied the same/similar subject and what their undergraduate subjects were		Lived away from home		The ranking of their first degree university in China	Worked between under-graduate and postgraduate degrees	
		High	Satisfactory	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		Yes	No
<i>Major Case</i>												
<b>1. Charles</b>	Male		√	√		√	Communications and Engineering		√	Top		√
<b>2. Dani</b>	Female		√ using one year after the undergraduate study to pass IELTS and GRE		√	√	Electronic Engineering	√		Average		√
<b>3. Emily</b>	Female		√ re-took IELTS in the UK after the EAP course		√	√	Electronic Information and Technology	√		Top		√

**Table 5.2 What research participants in *MSc SPC* said about their previous experiences in China during Interview 1 (to be continued)**

Partici- pants	Gender	Level of English		Experienced western teaching and learning approaches		Whether studied the same/similar subject and what their undergraduate subjects were		Lived away from home		The ranking of their first degree university in China	Worked between under-graduate and postgraduate degrees	
		High	Satisfactory	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		Yes	No
<i>Mini Case</i>												
<b>4. Lillian</b>	Female		√		√		√ Instrument Science Technology	√		Top		√
<b>5. Bruce</b>	Male		√ using one year after the undergraduate study to satisfy the entry requirement		√		√ Automatization		√	Average	√ Worked informally at his mother's IT company	
<b>6. Mike</b>	Male		√		√	√ Automatization			√	Top		√

**Table 5.2** What research participants in *MSc SPC* said about their previous experiences in China during Interview 1

*Case 1:* Charles' case was chosen as a major case study because he shared certain similarities with the other research participants and non-participant peers in that:

- he had experienced no difficulties in achieving a satisfactory IELTS score in China;
- he did not think his undergraduate subject was significantly different from what he would be learning in the UK;
- he had been a 'big-city boy' and had never left home or worked.

What differentiated Charles was that he was the only research participant who already had relatives in Edinburgh and, although his undergraduate study was in a hard applied discipline, he had had previous experience of learning using a key western pedagogical approach involving interaction with peers.

*Case 2:* The second major case study, Dani, was (along with Emily and Lillian) one of the few female students in this male-dominated Programme. Unusually, she had taken a one-year gap following her undergraduate graduation to pass the GRE and IELTS exams. Indeed, she was the only research participant who had passed two international English tests and had won four unconditional Master's offers from four UK universities. Like some of her peers, she had left her home city for her undergraduate study.

*Case 3:* Emily was chosen as a major case study because she was the only research participant who had found it difficult to achieve a satisfactory IELTS score in China. Because of this she had been required to take a compulsory English for Academic Purposes course and to then re-sit the IELTS exam before being accepted for a place at Edinburgh. She was also the only research participant living in non-university accommodation.

*Cases 4-6:* The other three participants were treated as minor case studies.

Despite various similarities to other participants, each nonetheless had distinctive features:

- Lillian not only experienced a change of subject from first degree to Master's, but had a boyfriend who had begun a PhD programme at the same University;

- Bruce struggled to talk about his Master's journey even though the interviews were mainly in Chinese, and he had taken an extra year to achieve the required English test scores. He felt his gap year and a change of subject (from Automatization to *SPC*), had made his Master's experiences especially challenging;
- like Bruce, Mike's first degree was also in Automatization, but unlike Bruce, he did not believe that he had changed his subject significantly.

All *SPC* participants' actual challenges and transitions will be discussed in detail in the subsequent part of this chapter. Some important extracts were selected from students' interview transcripts as evidence to indicate/demonstrate their viewpoints.

#### **5.4 A major case study on Charles**

##### *Introduction to Charles*

In 2009, Charles, a 23-year-old male student, came from a top-ranked university in China to his Master's study in the UK. Before embarking on his UK studies, he had never left home and was worried about his future overseas experience, but relatives who had moved to Edinburgh several years earlier had provided reassurance:

[Before I came to the UK] I needed to do some preparations, both for daily life and for mental adaptation... Like me, I was never away from home... If I couldn't make a [mental] good preparation, I may collapse easily... I supposed I was fighting in a battle, hard to win and long time to fight. So if I could have an injection before getting ill, I might be stronger... (IQ1, 80-82)

I don't know how western people look at eastern people, as we have different values and ways of thinking. We're born from a country administrated by the Communist Party... (IQ1, 381)

My relatives told me that they had the same problem when they just came here [in the UK]... They comforted me. And they encouraged me to overcome... Compared to other students who couldn't receive help like they give me, it is much easier for me to solve problems. (IQ1, 7)

Moreover, because he had graduated from a top-ranked university in China, where he



had gained some experience of western pedagogies (IQ1, 139), it was likely that he was a relatively accomplished and self-regulated learner:

[At undergraduate study], I wanted to learn at a higher level [of degree]. So I had to get a good mark. This learning motive was recent and short term. The motive which motivates me in the long term is that I want to be a talented person who will be useful to the society... [So] I still worked although it was time to enjoy life. I still worked although it was time to build a relationship with a girl. I did everything as long as it's good to improve the mark, for example more interactions with teachers...' (IQ1, 87-90)

Similarly, a close relationship between his first degree (Communications and Engineering) and his Master' subject also suggested a smooth transition. Analysis of Charles' transcripts suggests that despite good progress in all transitions, three closely interwoven dimensions of transition stood out – language, level of study and pedagogical culture.

#### *Charles' transition in language*

Charles' transition in language progressed smoothly, generally speaking. While in Interview 1 he was challenged with understanding subject-situated vocabulary and terminology, he responded by investing more effort in learning autonomously. His efforts had evidently been successful because in the later interviews he no longer talked about the language barrier.

Charles was confident about overcoming his initial language difficulties because his listening ability improved rapidly and, because the Programme did not make particular demands on students' abilities in speaking and reading in English: 'We have few readings and we also don't need to speak too much.' (IQ1, 174) Nevertheless, Charles had not fully anticipated the challenges of using specific subject-situated discourses when interacting with teachers:

...More or less, I couldn't make full sense... I asked questions, then they answered, which I still couldn't understand. As far as this situation, I have to take a more conservative method – working hard. I like entertaining, but I have to make sacrifices and entertain later. (IQ1, 188-192)

There might be something interesting [about what my UK teachers said in the class], but I can't feel that. When teachers talk about something funny that makes western people laugh, I couldn't give a smile... [This may be because of] the cultural gap. As I just came here, I couldn't say the main reason is cultural

differences. I still think language barrier causes that. (IQ1, 363)

As the second extract suggests, he also experienced difficulty with understanding the UK-situated socio-cultural language, but this is not alluded to as an issue after Interview 1. The subject-situated dimension of language, by contrast, became more difficult to handle when the Programme progressed into the assessment/exam component:

Because I'm a non-native speaker, it [the exam] was really challenging. Although we can bring a dictionary to look for words, the limited exam time wouldn't allow. (IQ2, 240)

Charles felt disadvantaged as, compared to native speakers of English, he had to spend more time on understanding the questions' requirements, which left even less time for the rather greater challenge of writing answers to the questions posed:

There's no problem when I'm calculating... It becomes a problem when I'm trying to write long sentences or essays, as I felt my sentence isn't that localized – Chinese English. (IQ2, 315)

This extract reveals the influence of the distinctive subject matter in *SPC* on the language barrier: while Charles did not find using statistical discourses challenging, he found it difficult to use textual discourses. The subject nature of hard disciplines, compared to soft disciplines, requires more symbolic discourses, which can more readily be used as an 'international language'. It is therefore not surprising to find that Charles felt that, over the course of the Programme, all modes of English improved with the exception of writing.

#### *Charles' transition in level of study and transition in pedagogical culture*

Analysis of Charles' interviews reveals that, as the Programme progressed and his conceptions of learning at Master's level developed, the more learner autonomy he was able to assume. Furthermore, his transitions in level of study and in pedagogical culture were closely related, which enabled Charles to feel more confident in his ability to overcome challenges.

In Interview 1, Charles' realistic expectations of Master's-level learning are already

apparent:

Teaching should be teaching ways of learning, ways of thinking and ways of developing as a person, which should benefit my whole life. But the Master's programme here is just one year, so it isn't realistic to learn the most advanced technology. If I were taught how to learn, maybe in the future I could do something which is important to industrial development in China. (IQ1, 39)

...when we're doing questions, finding out the answer isn't the most important thing. The most important is the process. (IQ1, 30)

Charles realised that he was required to shift his conception of learning towards the higher levels identified by Marton and Säljö (2005). He believed that learning in a western pedagogical culture focused on the role of students rather than teachers, and called upon Master's students to be 'active learners', for example learners who can use external resources to facilitate their own learning:

In the UK, learners themselves should be active as well. Students should be clear about what they want. And this university can provide enough supporting facilities. We should know how to make a good use of these learning facilities and how to make these facilities support learning... (IQ1, 50)

As the interviews progressed to the second phase, Charles had developed a clearer sense of the requirements of learners in a western pedagogical culture:

The teacher gave a broad area to teach, but the knowledge he/she gave was very limited. I couldn't understand why. I thought in the UK the knowledge the teachers teach is really broad, which requires us to study every part outside the class. It's not manageable if we're still to be good at answering exam questions like we were in China. I'll try to study firmly. (IQ2, 224)

From Charles' perspective, autonomous learning, once he realised that this was required of him, was necessary throughout his Master's journey:

You [Good students in *SPC*] should have to be persevering. The life's dull and repetitive. It's demanding to have a quality that you could stick doing the same thing... Although the UK teachers show their experience, the teaching style's not going to change, such as having lectures and assignments and answering questions... Once you go out for fun which disrupts your focus, it's hard to get back to study peacefully. (IQ2, 18-23)

Charles noted that the subject matter of *SPC* constrained the ways in which knowledge could be taught, which could cause him sometimes to become bored. He realised that the solution for him was to ensure that he kept learning autonomously, which in turn helped him to remain motivated to learn. Another

approach which refreshed Charles when he became tired of independent learning was learning through interaction with peers and engaging in critical thinking:

...We thought it deserved to discuss the answering methods before doing [the individual assignments]. It was effective/helpful to get an ideal question result... When you're doing a question, some of the problems raised make you think you may be confused. Why couldn't the right result be made? Some cohort-mates can check your idea from other aspects, which may be helpful to solve the problem. In the class, teachers supervise. While discussing with peers, it also can inspire each other quickly. (IQ2, 124)

[Good students are] Like British students...more willing to think deeply. They should propose questions and be suspicious of teachers' viewpoints... (IQ2, 18-21)

Charles had enjoyed engaging in learning through interaction with peers in China, which may to some extent account for his smooth transition in pedagogical cultures. The preceding quotation demonstrates that he clearly grasped that successful learning could be achieved through interacting with peers who have different perspectives, and from engaging critically with what the teachers said.

By Interview 3, as the Programme progressed to the project component, it is evident that Charles relished the greater opportunities which would open up for being critical and learning autonomously, and was keenly aware of how much he had developed as a learner since his first degree:

In China, I accepted everything told by teachers. I didn't realise I should spontaneously reflect and criticise what the teacher said. I should find it's interesting to think whether the teachers' words are right or wrong. (IQ3, 74)

There's nothing the same [between the teaching and supervision components]... Basically, one relies on the teachers' teaching, while the other one relies on individual work. One is to input, while the other one is to output. (IQ3, 200-203)

[What I learnt from the final project was] the ability of finding the resolution by myself. There's nobody to rely on. The only one is you – yourself. I'm still in the process of challenging myself. (IQ3, 223)

The greater autonomy and critical thinking required in the project component also brought a change in his interaction with the teacher:

My supervisor's a good teacher. He could give instructions to the future stage, so

I can have a way to do following things. He wouldn't interrupt my methods during the process, but he would assess my result... (IQ3, 31)

It also called for greater attention to time management and self-regulation of learning:

There's another quality – self-discipline, what means to manage time appropriately... Epecially when a cluster of time is left to you, it's really different whether you have a good or bad time arrangement... You have to beat sluggishness... (IQ3, 11-19)

### *Charles' performance on practising subject-specific literacies*

Analysis of Interviews 1 to 3 reveals that Charles was challenged when trying to acquire and practise subject-specific literacies. This is evident in his performances on assessments. Although he eventually succeeded in his Master's learning, he did not feel able to talk with confidence because, from his perspective, the poor assessment structure in the Programme confused him. In Interview 1 he observed:

I don't know why in the UK, we only have one final closed-book exam to be assessed, which accounts as 100% mark. I heard previously there should be many ways of assessment which made up different percentages of the final mark. But actually, here there's just "one shot", which I don't think is reasonable [it's not fair to judge a student's academic achievement by only one exam]. Even the course module Z [a lab-based module] is going to assess us by one exam. (IQ1, 305)

In the second interview, he expressed the opinion that the assessment system was not fair.

...I couldn't make sense of the questions' requirements. So all I could do was to answer the question in my own way. (IQ2, 263-266)

Furthermore, although his comprehension may have been matched to the question requirements, he was challenged when choosing appropriate subject-situated vocabulary for his answer even when he had a dictionary:

My writing in English isn't that good... What I wrote down may confuse my British teachers. I think this happens most of time. [For example] Once I said recalculation and algorithm. Later I was told by the teacher that algorithm means to make the computer to run out the result. But recalculation means to recalculate by human hands which isn't appropriate to computer running. My teacher...asked me was that meaning I was trying to say. I said Yes. (IQ2, 138-142)

By the end of the Programme, Charles no longer talked about the challenge of using subject-situated vocabulary, but in Interview 3 he was also critical of a lack of appropriate feedback:

I couldn't make sense [what makes for a good answer], as there's little feedback returned from the last semester... Now I had to do it basing on my previous experience [undergraduate experience in China]. (IQ3, 134-137)

Charles reported some positive exam experiences, even where the exams involved tough questions:

The [exam] questions [in module X] were new. They differed from the past papers and sample questions. They made me feel interesting, although they were hard to answer. (IQ3, 161)

I think it [the exam of module Y] was challenging, which was quite good. I'm not a student who pays attention to the result. I would be satisfied if the questions could be given at a certain high level, as long as I won't fail. It could stimulate students to learn, which I think is good. (IQ3, 191)

However, he also reported some negative exam experiences:

The only thing you need to do [the exam of M] is to remove the answer from the exemplar questions on the textbook to this exam paper. (IQ3, 186)

Every student didn't get good marks. The exam questions were evil... It asked too much key knowledge in only one question. And the form of asking questions was also new. It made everyone frustrated and stressful. After we finished, everyone felt it was screwed up. (IQ3, 187-189)

These findings suggest that inappropriate assessments and uncertainty and confusion about exam requirements can negatively influence students' self-confidence to acquire subject literacies.

#### *Summary of Charles' case*

From the evidence of the three interviews with Charles, it can be suggested that his experiences of transitions were generally less challenging than those experienced by other students, and he made steady improvement as the year progressed.

His case is of particular interest because his preparations prior to coming to the UK seem to have had a positive influence on how he responded to the challenges he

encountered with his overseas learning experience. Although he had made mental preparations before he arrived in the UK because he was afraid of living and studying away from his family, it can be reasonably argued that such preparation really helped him when he faced challenges, especially in academic learning; when he encountered challenges this psychological preparation enabled him to find coping strategies. Moreover, Charles' desire for a high degree of self-regulated learning appears to be 'congruent' with Master's teachers' expectations (Vermunt and Verloop, 1999). His 'conception of learning' reflected what subject-situated Master's-level literacies called for, and his 'cultural scripts' (Welikala and Watkins, 2008) had evolved sufficiently to scaffold his Master's learning in the UK. Consequently, it seems reasonable to conclude, he was better equipped than most of his peers to close the gap between undergraduate learning in China and postgraduate learning in the UK. Indeed, although he had difficulties with recognising the requirements of academic literacies, he gained satisfactory scores and graduated successfully.

## **5.5 A major case study on Dani**

### *Introduction to Dani*

As already noted, Dani had taken a one-year gap after doing well in her undergraduate degrees to prepare to pass the English tests required for UK Master's level study, had gained satisfactory scores in two tests and had won four unconditional offers from four top-ranked UK universities. Furthermore, she had lived away from home since her undergraduate years and she had some learning experience of western pedagogy in China.

As the Programme proceeded, her self-esteem became undermined because she was not making as much academic progress as most of her Chinese peers. Four interwoven dimensions of the Master's transition proved challenging for Dani: language, level of study, pedagogical culture and living and learning overseas.

### *Dani's transition in language, transition in level of study and transition in pedagogical culture*

Analysis of Interviews 1 to 3 reveals that Dani experienced difficulties during her transition to learning in English. In Interview 1, although she thought English was the biggest barrier for Chinese students, she was confident that she could overcome this. However, by Interview 2, she 'woke up' and realised that this was much more challenging than she had previously thought because of the particular linguistic subject-specific demands. Although she claimed that her listening and reading in English had improved, her skills in writing and speaking in English had not. By Interview 3, in her opinion, her overall English proficiency had improved considerably. However, it had not, a situation which became evident from her other dimensions of transition.

In Interview 1, Dani realised that compared to her western peers, she coped less well with the language demands, but she thought that she had an advantage when calculating: in her words 'the problem for non-Chinese students is mathematics, while for Chinese students it is English' (IQ1, 40). Because of the language barrier,



she seemed to assume more learner autonomy than she had in China:

...In undergraduate study, I started reading books at the last minute of going to the exam, but now I have to start reading earlier...because of language barrier. Because there are terms.... At the beginning, the speed of reading the English text is of course slower than reading in Chinese. (IQ1, 79)

Dani not only recognised the reading demands of subject-situated vocabulary but also saw writing and speaking in English as more challenging for Chinese learners:

...I think most of Chinese students learn passively. Our ability of receiving information is better than the ability of expressing, which leads to our poor proficiency of writing and speaking in English... (IQ1, 81)

She appeared to find a coping strategy and expected to improve her English through her overseas learning; in her words ‘...If I have problems, I’ll look for dictionary...’ (IQ1, 113). Therefore, she believed that she could ‘...handle everything’ (IQ1, 113) and that ‘English [was] not a particular barrier. Because we’re in an academic environment, when your reading is increasing, potential difficulties would reduce...’ (IQ1, 81). However, in Interview 2 she changed her mind and was aware that the subject-situated vocabulary and academic discourses were more complicated when interacting with teachers:

R: Is English a problem for Chinese students whose first language isn’t English?

Dani: Absolutely yes. For example, you’re asking questions, teachers don’t understand what you’re talking about. It’s because the vocabulary and structure we use isn’t what they usually use... (IQ2, 105)

Intriguingly, by Interview 2, Dani was confident again that her English proficiency had undoubtedly improved, and she expanded further on this in interview 3:

Now I can understand. But I should improve more on speaking in English. After all, the opportunities to speak are fewer than the opportunities to listen. Reading is better for sure compared to its level when I was in China. Because the reading context is in English, so it definitely improves based on practice. I have fewer chances to write, because we have more calculations than writing assignments. (IQ2, 180)

My knowledge improves, not only the taught knowledge, but also English knowledge, such as terms. Previously I couldn’t explain a formula, now I can use four words, namely “plus”, “minus”, “multiple” and “divide”... My speaking improves. I’m not afraid of speaking anymore. I don’t have to think and formulate the sentences in my brain first. I can say it directly. Reading is much

better than before. Writing is better, but it doesn't say my grammar and (essay) structure are better. But I can write emails to my teachers... (IQ3, 32)

Despite Dani's growing confidence, the examples she gives here (knowing the words for very basic calculations, and contacting teachers by email) only touch the edges of what is what was required by Master's level subject-specific literacies. Indeed, there are other indications elsewhere in the interview transcripts that Dani still faced considerable challenges, because her transition in language was intricately interwoven with her other dimensions of transition – in level of study and pedagogical culture. She had not realised that Master's level study required increased student autonomy, nor that gaining subject knowledge would prove more difficult than it had in her undergraduate study, and her self-esteem diminished between Interviews 1 and 3. The next two extracts demonstrate the significant gap between coming to recognise what was expected of her and taking appropriate action:

At the level of higher education, what is most important is independent learning. Teachers' teaching is only leading... Learning something well is you understanding the knowledge and using it as you like. (IQ1, 3-9)

R: What do you think of the reading?

Dani: I didn't read. (IQ1, 58)

R: Do you think the teacher is helpful in this tutorial?

Dani: I didn't do homework, so I didn't go to his tutorial for two weeks. (IQ1, 54)

Dani attributed her struggles with studying to 'procrastination' (IQ1, 84-85), but a more likely reason was that she had continued to approach learning as if she was still an undergraduate student:

...I feel I just jumped to this third week. I just begin to study right now... In the first two weeks, I didn't feel I had a feeling of settlement mentally. It takes time to know a new environment. I was adjusting... I can't say 'adjusting', actually I was 'accepting'... (IQ1, 109)

Similarly, she did not seem to see autonomy in learning and interaction with teachers as fundamental to Master's level learning in the UK:

...His (a teacher's) reading is relevant to the course or it is to extend the class

knowledge. If you want to go further, you should read... (IQ2, 29)

She (an international teacher in the UK) employs a traditional non-western approach to teach, because we have one quiz in every one or two weeks... Other teachers (in the UK) are more likely to perform like herding sheep. They would not say you must do something. This teacher tends to watch or manage students... It should suit students who are like me with poor self-discipline ability... (IQ2, 33)

This gap widened when the Programme progressed to the project component:

...I still think learning is how you understand the knowledge, while teaching is showing the way and you continue walk down to this way... Just like my supervisors, they told me to go to this direction. But they would not tell you how to do... (IQ3, 6-8)

...I have two supervisors [for my final project]. They're people to stimulate each other. If they think anything differently, they would argue. I sat between them just like a sandwich. I'm just listening and thinking passively. They only need to give me a result after they finish their arguments. (IQ3, 90)

#### *Dani's performance on practising subject-specific literacies*

Dani increasingly attributed her difficulties to extrinsic factors. This is very evident in her experiences of assessment to perform her grasp of subject literacies, where she found exams a 'huge stress' (IQ2, 51) and 'didn't get good exam results' (IQ2, 57):

I should prepare better before exams. The time of exams wasn't enough. It's only one and a half hours, while in China we had two hours. Furthermore, the exam questions are huge. I couldn't finish all or I even could not finish. I had the same feeling in every exam of Semester 1. (IQ2, 51)

I did that module's mid-term exam so bad... I was confused about what the exam questions wanted me to do. I misunderstood, so my answer way was wrong. It was just because of limited time... (IQ2, 77)

There were three questions. I just picked up the first and the second one. I didn't even glance at the third, which was chosen by most of my peers... I was confused... I didn't know we had the right to choose which questions to answer. (IQ3, 68)

It's not fair to have one final shot [final exam] to assess one person's performance. I hope we'll have other methods (to share the percentages of final marks)...[for example] attendance and assignments or mid-term exams... It means it shares the stress into four lab-book assignments. It leaves me time, so I don't need to run the programmes in a rush. I can even google how to solve the question in a

different way... (IQ3, 46)

Towards the end of the programme, Dani demonstrated her uncertainty about what was expected of her in Master's level learning:

The teacher (in module Y) gave marks as he/she likes. You may be scored low even though you think you have done it well. Or you may be scored high even though you think you have not done it well. I couldn't make sense of how the teacher marks. (IQ3, 76)

### *Summary of Dani's case*

Dani encountered significant challenges in her transitions. This downward spiral resulted in a loss of self-esteem. Dani's journey merits attention because, facing failure, she demonstrated a confusing mix of over-confidence and uncertainty. However, she was unable to understand exactly what Master's-level learning required of her and failed to assume the necessary degree of learner autonomy and responsibility for her own learning. When failures came, she tended to attribute them to external sources to protect her self-esteem. As the Programme progressed, she appeared to be 'temporising' (Perry, 1970) and indeed she regressed, did not regain her confidence, and looked to her teachers to regulate her learning. This can be seen as a result of her insufficiently evolved 'cultural scripts' (Welikala and Watkins, 2008), or alternatively of insufficiently developed 'conceptions of learning' (Marton and Säljö, 2005).

## **5.6 A major case study on Emily**

### *Introduction to Emily*

Emily was a 22-year-old female student. In the initial interview, she impressed the researcher with her ambition to undertake a PhD programme after completing the *MSc SPC*. How realistic this goal was seemed open to question, however Emily drew confidence from the fact that she had not changed subjects and already had experience of living and studying away from home. Yet, as Table 5.2 had indicated, she had not been able to meet the Programme's language requirement before coming to the UK, and had had to enrol in a two-month compulsory pre-sessional English course (EAP course) and then re-take the IELTS exam in order to be accepted for the MSc programme. Second, her experiences in China had not provided her with opportunities to learn how to use western pedagogies. Third, although her first degree was from a top-ranked Chinese university, she believed she had experienced poor undergraduate teaching and had been a strategic learner focused mainly on gaining good exam scores (IQ1, 50).

Despite all her disadvantages, Emily not only succeeded in her Master's learning by producing an outstanding Master's project and publishing a journal article in the UK, but she also won a scholarship for her PhD study in Canada. Exploring Emily's experiences of Master's-level study in relation to the three dimensions of transitions predicted to be challenging is therefore of great interest.

### *Emily's transition in level of study and transition in pedagogical culture*

Between Interviews 1 and 3, Emily progressed particularly smoothly in the transitions of level of study and pedagogical culture by assuming sufficient learner responsibility to close the gap between the requirements of undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Even in Interview 1, Emily realised that there were particular expectations of a good learner in a western pedagogical culture, and she appeared to prefer the greater autonomy and learning by interaction which was called for:

...I think the ability of asking questions is important here [in the UK]. When approaching knowledge, the biggest difference between the western students and the Chinese is that the Chinese students don't like to ask questions. Seeking why is mostly done by oneself, not by asking teachers. But I can feel that the UK teachers would like to be asked... (IQ1, 138)

In China, we only had tutorials before exams. Actually the so-called 'tutorial' was only for us to detect what would be examined. We tried to make the exam questions slip from the teacher's mouth. I like to be here [in the UK]. If you have something unsure or unknown, you can ask teachers. They wouldn't tell you the answers like the Chinese teachers usually did. They just show you ways of thinking and then leave you to do research. I feel the UK way of teaching and learning helps me to learn at the Master's level. (IQ1, 8)

The UK teachers and the UK students communicate a lot. In China, it's not polite to interrupt the teacher in the middle of the class. But here the UK teachers welcome questions, because they may think students can ask questions only if they listen to the class... I feel I'm closer to the UK teachers than to my teachers in China. (IQ1, 142-144)

Emily seemed to encounter few challenges to her identity as a learner when moving from eastern to western pedagogical cultures. This may be because she did not feel she had had been taught to learn well in China where she was embedded in a different set of pedagogical values and norms. Her 'conception of learning' and 'approaches to learning' had come to be shaped more by the 'small cultures' (Holliday, 1999a, 1999b) than by the larger Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC, Biggs, 1996).

Emily was conscious that 'conception of learning' had a wider definition at the Master's level than at undergraduate level, and went beyond just solving problems:

...Previously I thought learning was to learn everything taught by the teachers... But now at the Master's level, learning is more important than teaching... at the undergraduate, I thought learning was to know a formula and a conclusion. But at the Master's level, learning is to learn the theories underneath them... Learning at this [Master's] stage is not to learn what we see. It should go wider and deeper. (IQ1, 14-16; c.f. IQ1, 34)

When Emily's new understanding of learning developed to fulfill the aims of Master's learning – what Argyris and Schön (1978) call 'double loop learning', she took action to close the gap:

Learn[ing] more, ask[ing] more and finish[ing] tasks in time [are the requirements to a good Master's student]. I know these because in the last semester, I only learned very hard before the exams, which made me stressful and tired. So now if I learn every day, it will be much easier... I think I gradually acquire these capabilities as the Programme progresses. (IQ2, 6-8)

It [my progress] is much better than Semester 1. Firstly, I've adapted to learn in English. Secondly, I've known what I'm going to do. In the last semester, I was dispirited and disenchanted in learning. But in this Semester, I began devoting and learning harder... I take every chance to interact with teachers. (IQ2, 12)

Every student should be employed with three qualities – willing to learn, willing to ask and being diligent... I've got all of them since the beginning of Semester 2. This is because I tried to figure out how to learn better in this Programme by giving a summary to myself. (IQ3, 12-16)

It is therefore not surprising to find that she experienced a greater sense of achievement and self-confidence, and a further boost to her learning motivation, when she reached the project component which allowed more scope for autonomy and reduced teacher regulation:

...My project's progressing well. I've done everything the supervisor asked me to do. Now I'm in the middle of making a contribution... My deadline's August, but my supervisor asked me to submit in the middle of July so I can have time to publish a journal article... (IQ3, 120-133)

### *Emily's transition in language*

Emily's smooth transitions in level of study and pedagogical culture were inextricably linked to her transition in language. After taking the EAP pre-session course her English had 'improved quite considerably' (IQ1, 72) but in the Master's programme itself she still faced the challenge of subject-situated language:

It's challenging for us who're not native English speakers. The first is the teachers' accents, because even the standard BBC English may confuse you. The second is the subject vocabulary. After all when you had first known them, they were in Chinese. So while it's easily understood in Chinese, it's hard in English. (IQ1, 164)

Emily found the course module delivered remotely by video particularly difficult, even when she recorded the class. But she appreciated the notes one of her teachers wrote to help her to understand the subject-specific discourses:

This teacher [of module Y] is considerate to us international students. Actually the knowledge is quite simple, but because English isn't my mother language, I find it hard to understand. It becomes explicit when he writes.... Then I can understand, because the knowledge I can't understand in listening I can understand when seeing figures. (IQ1, 94)

This deserves attention for two reasons. First, it highlights the fact that the subject matter, because of its 'international language' (figures), helped Emily to understand the subject-situated discourses and avoid becoming demotivated. Second, although Emily acknowledged that recording did not help her much, she assumed responsibility as a Master's student learning in the western pedagogical culture (transitions in level of study and pedagogical culture) to cope with it.

Emily's learner autonomy was evident elsewhere:

...I memorize subject-situated vocabulary every day after the class to widen my glossary. I'm not going to read the Chinese textbooks like my peers usually do. If you always read the Chinese texts, you'll always have the sense of reliance on them. You should and you must read the English books. (IQ1, 174)

...I think using English to express is challenging. Although I've stayed here for one year, my ways of thinking are still the Chinese kind. So I still use the Chinese-style English to write (Master's) project... I learnt this because I felt different when reading my project report and reading the western authors' articles... So I have to cope with it by looking at others' writing and adopting their ways of writing to write (my report). (IQ3, 108-112)

As the second extract reveals, Emily transferred her old discourse pattern of writing in Chinese to writing in English (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). So, when faced with difficulties in re-constructing the information in her second language in writing – English – she came to recognise and bridge the gap between her way of writing and the 'ways of thinking and practising' of more experienced professionals (McCune and Hounsell, 2005).

#### *Emily's performance on practising subject-specific literacies*

Emily's performance with acquiring and practising subject-specific literacies was closely related to her transition in language and subject matter. The subject-specific language demands upon her were shaped by the nature of the subject:

My subject English improves, because I read many references written in English and I have known lots of new theories and knowledge about this subject. My



reading in English improves, because all I read is in English... Listening in English improves considerably. After all, in this English-speaking environment, I have more chances to practise English. My speaking in English is ok – at the same level as when I was in China, because we have lots of Chinese students in this cohort, so I don't really speak in English. Writing...like my subject, we're hardly asked to write something. All we're asked to do is to answer [statistical] questions. I don't think my writing improves... (IQ3, 4; c.f. IQ2, 139)

The Master's literacy requirements of *SPC* focused less on students' writing and speaking than on programming and calculating:

...Basically all my course modules are more like maths. So it's important to show your problem-solving steps clearly and make exam answers condensed. You should let the teachers find your answers easily... (IQ3, 88; c.f. IQ3, 72)

A combination of limited language competence and limited opportunities to develop her English language writing skills meant that Emily found it challenging to write essay-type questions and give descriptions. A further limitation was the absence of teacher feedback on exams in this Programme (IQ2, 80, 96; IQ3, 84, 94, 104), which added to her uncertainty about what was expected: 'I have no idea what makes for a good exam answer' (IQ2, 82) and 'I don't know which one (my exam answer) was right, which one was wrong' (IQ3, 84). The main coping strategy she adopted was to use figures and codes (diagrammatic discourses) to avoid writing texts and giving descriptions (textual discourses):

It needs descriptions... I draw pictures [figures]... Pictures show everything – your every step to lead to the answers. (IQ3, 106 c.f. IQ2, 98-100)

Another way she assumed learner responsibility was by checking past exam papers to find what she understood and what she did not understand about the academic literacies needed for exams (IQ2, 127). Indeed, by Interview 3, Emily no longer talked about her confusion about exam questions and presented a developed grasp of what made for a good answer:

This course [Y] is all about writing codes. I had already known how to write codes. But I didn't write as they're required... Now I write in order to let my audience understand easily and concisely. I also write the steps why the results can come out. Now I've done this in my project writing. (IQ3, 74)

*Summary of Emily's case*

Based on the preceding evidence, Emily coped well with transitions in language, level of study and pedagogical culture. Although she had previously been a strategic learner, driven by achieving high scores, she developed a high Master's-level understanding of 'conception of learning' and appropriate 'cultural scripts' (Welikala and Watkin, 2008), and was able to take greater responsibility and self-regulate her learning. This 'congruence' (Vermunt and Verloop, 1999) resulted in growth, both intellectual and academic.

## **5.7 A minor case study on Lillian**

### *Introduction to Lillian*

As previously noted in Table 5.2, Lillian was similar in some respects to other research participants, except that she had experienced a change of subject from first-degree to Master's, and had a boyfriend doing a PhD at the same University. Although the main teaching form in her undergraduate studies in a hard-applied discipline – Instrument Science Technology – was teacher-centered lectures and taking *SPC* for her was a change of subject, as noted in the Interview 1 transcript, she had learned most of the relevant theories relating to *SPC* before.

Lillian coped well in her transition in level of studies. As observed by the researcher, she maintained relatively stable affective emotions and self-confidence. This may be related to the fact that she proved to be an outstandingly successful Master's student. She was the second research participant, besides Emily (Case 3), to continue her studies to a doctoral level with a scholarship after she completed the Master's. She started to think of applying for a PhD programme by Interview 2 and submitted the application before Interview 3, which probably became a motivation for her to devote more time and effort to be a qualified Master's student with learner's responsibility.

Evidence of her capacity to cope is apparent from Interview 1. Learner autonomy was significant to a Master's student in her discipline when solving problems:

...because we're Master's students and not high school students who [need to] learn general knowledge. [Master's] Teachers don't teach knowledge. They should update the knowledge... They need to show what problems are in this area, so we could know what we're going to solve. They don't need to tell you what the truth is. They're only responsible for guiding us to find the research direction... (IQ1, 4)

This teacher's really involved [in the class], but we couldn't really understand. So we have to digest what he taught after the class... This tutorial is like every other tutorial: it's your call to ask questions. We have to read his readings. The content taught in the class is only outlines, so we have to read independently about those details... (IQ1, 61)

Intriguingly, she came to see a didactic approach to teaching as inadequate to study

at Master's level:

I think this [what this teacher does] is the worst teaching... There's no explanation to the theories and how these theories are going to work practically. He only gives facts... The bright side is I can find the clue which I should memorize before the exam. He has a quiz in every week. From doing quizzes, I can know what I have known, what I haven't known and what I can ignore. Even with something I've known, I only know the facts and what routine solutions are... (IQ2, 36-39)

Lillian transition in language is also of interest. It was evident from her transcripts that she was influenced by the need to understand the specialist terminology of *SPC*:

It's hard to adapt to the teaching in English. And there's another challenge of subject terminology, which hindered you in responding to teachers' questions... It's easy to answer questions in Chinese, but if in English you have to translate in your heart first... So before I speak, others have answered... (To handle this,) I'll remember them [terminologies], when I see them in books... (IQ1, 134-139)

One effective coping strategy she used was to 'usually choose questions [to answer] which only required statistical calculations' (IQ2, 102-103).

## **5.8 A minor case study on Bruce**

### *Introduction to Bruce*

Bruce's experience on the Master's Programme was of particular interest because from all the participants who were involved in this research, he was the only one who did not graduate with a Master's degree. He withdrew from the Master's Programme before the final stage, which was the Dissertation, and because he had not passed enough of the taught courses and gained sufficient credits to be awarded a Diploma, he graduated with a Certificate. This outcome, as his transcripts suggest, was as a result of the difficulties he experienced in three important and closely interwoven dimensions of transition: language; the knowledge gap he experienced with the shift from an undergraduate to a higher degree; and experiencing a pedagogical culture which expected greater levels of learner autonomy.

Turning to the first, language, Bruce claimed that his English proficiency had improved from Interview 1 to 3, but interestingly although he believed that the Programme was not really demanding in terms of the language demands made on him, he was nevertheless clearly challenged in his efforts to cope with the subject-specific language demands being made on him with regard to reading and writing, and he was challenged by the need to listen and speak in English:

...first of all teachers who are the native English speakers speak very fast. Some of them have accents. So for us whose first language is not English, speaking fast becomes a barrier. And when I talk with my teachers, I cannot express myself clearly. (IQ1, 42)

Not only was he finding it challenging to cope with listening and speaking, but he found it difficult when his teacher spoke too quickly to allow him to concurrently translate, process and understand what was being said; dealing with the different accents brought an added challenge. Because of this he felt increasingly unable to interact with his teachers and to express his ideas clearly. It became clear from his interviews that he had come to feel that he was stuck with this dimension of transition, and that he was unable to cope with subject-specific vocabulary and discourses which characterised study at Master's level. Rather than being able to find some positive coping strategies, which would enable him to overcome these

problems, the strategies he developed for coping with language and subject discourse problems were simply to avoid or sidestep difficulties rather than attempt to overcome them:

...So I have to rely on writing to handle this [speaking and listening in English]. I write down the content which I'm going to say to teachers. And when I am face to the teacher, I write formulae. I don't have to say a word, because the formula has said itself. (IQ1, 151-156)

...I handle this by reading the Chinese text and googling handouts in Chinese. I feel it quite helps. (IQ2, 39)

I really don't understand what this teacher said in the class, because I don't have prior knowledge... (IQ1, 91)

...I can hardly give my comments on this course, because I never understand what the teacher says... I didn't read anything [relevant to this course]. (IQ1, 95-99)

As the Programme proceeded he felt less and less able to cope, adopted what were unhelpful approaches and ultimately moved into a negative frame of mind and a downward spiral from which he did not recover. As the extracts demonstrate, he did not speak or contribute to discussions, he read texts in Chinese rather than in English, he did not do any of the preparatory reading for the classes and as a result of this he increasingly felt that he simply did not understand what was being taught.

Secondly, as the last extract suggests, Bruce's transition in subject matter was problematic as a result of the gap in knowledge between his first degree and the Master's programme, but also because he did not appear to be able to take responsibility for attempting to close this gap. At times it appeared that he was aware of what was expected of a Master's student, and could discuss this in his interviews; for example, as the extract below demonstrates, he clearly understood that independent learning was required if he was to be successful with the transition in level of study:

The most important is independent learning and researching. You need to find out the problem, research the problem and know how to solve this problem. A good [Master's] student should also have something creative... You are not only to solve the problem. You also should solve this problem quicker than your teachers... (IQ1, 117)

Bruce was also alert to cultural differences, and to what was valued in Eastern and Western cultures:

...Here (in the UK) they more value learning autonomy, but in China we more value teachers' help. (IQ1, 6)

However, he appeared to be unwilling, or unable, to take steps to attempt to close this gap. Instead, he attributed his difficulties to things he felt were outwith his control, to factors he believed he could not resolve, such as the subject change and his UK teachers' poor teaching:

I never learnt this course [module Z] [at my undergraduate]. It's too boring, because the teacher does nothing. And it too focuses on independent practice in the lab... He can give examples and tell us how to solve this question... I didn't read anything for this course... (IQ1, 105)

...Honestly, I never did this course module at undergraduate learning. It's really really difficult for me. I barely understand in the class... He [the UK teacher] always asks some questions to review the content taught in the previous class. It's helpful to other students, but not to me, because I haven't fully understood the previous class... (IQ1, 75, c.f. IQ1, 2, 4 and 21)

As the Programme progressed, it became evident that the more Bruce felt that his peers were leaving him behind, and the less likely it appeared that he would be able to catch up, the more obvious the undergraduate-postgraduate gap became, especially in terms of his 'conception of learning' (Marton and Säljö, 2005). His attempts to deal with this were not helpful to him, and he continued to use approaches to learning which had appeared to serve him well with his undergraduate study, thus failing to recognise that such approaches were not appropriate or indeed useful for study at Master's level:

My capability of doing independent learning was just okay, when I took the undergraduate study. It only ensured that I would not fail exams... Usually I searched online to find out summaries left from the previous students. I read those summaries and combined with my summary from the textbook. Before the exams, I memorized them. (IQ1, 17-19)

...This teacher arranges quizzes in every tutorial class. I think this quiz way is suitable for the Chinese students. This is because if she only asks questions, not everyone would answer. But quizzes would make us (everyone) actively review the taught knowledge, because we all want to get a good score... I like this way. It's good to be forced to do a thing... (IQ2, 39)

Bruce appeared to be locked into the identity of an undergraduate student with a Chinese perspective on learning; he was unable to understand and grasp that to be successful at Master's level different approaches were required. He felt that responsibility for his learning – and his interest and enjoyment of the teaching – lay with the teachers who should in his view entertain him and sustain his interest:

A good teacher should be funny, so he/she can interest us to listen to the class...  
(IQ1, 39)

I hope my [UK] teachers' teaching cannot be boring like this. They should give some examples and talk something interesting. (IQ2, 10)

In addition, he did not seem aware that greater learner autonomy was also required in his transitions in level of study and pedagogical culture. The more challenges he found himself unable to cope with, the more his confidence diminished. From Welikala and Watkin's perspective (2008), Bruce's 'cultural scripts' did not evolve in ways which would allow him to be successful in a western context where a different pedagogical culture was encountered. This was particularly evident in Interview 2, where he complained that unlike his previous teachers in China, who would negotiate students' grades with them, in the UK his UK teachers were 'too stubborn to be able to negotiate with my scores' (IQ2, 98).

It is therefore understandable that his participation in Interview 3 was far less engaged than was the case in his two earlier interviews. During the discussion of his performance on his ability to identify, deal with and practise subject-specific literacies, and on his exam scores, he actually lost his temper. This was clearly because by that point he knew that he had lost the opportunity to do the final dissertation, and had decided to withdraw from the MSc Programme.

While each of the participants encountered difficulties and challenges with their transitions, and some struggled throughout to cope with varying degrees of success, Bruce was the only one who did not finally find a way to cope and was the only one who did not gain a Master's award. There could be several possible reasons for this outcome: it may be that the particular combination of transition problems he



encountered meant that it was simply impossible for him to make the progress required, in such a short period, to complete the Programme successfully; it may be that he was simply being unrealistic by embarking on such a Programme without first taking courses which would have helped him to deal with the many language challenges he clearly faced; it may be that he was a person who did not cope well with perceived failure and that rather than facing up to it and attempting to find more useful, productive and positive approaches to his learning he attributed his failure to other factors which ultimately became a destructive approach; or it may be that he had some valid complaints with regard to the teaching and support he received when it was obvious that he was struggling to cope. This final point will be explored more fully in the **Discussion** in **Chapter 7**.

## 5.9 A minor case study on Mike

### *Introduction to Mike*

Although like Bruce, Mike had changed subjects from Automatization to *SPC*, he differed from Bruce in not viewing this subject change as an ‘impassable gulf’ (IQ1, 46) to which he ‘can adapt [to this new discipline learning] when making some modifications...’ (IQ1, 46). But since, as Mike acknowledged, he was at a disadvantage compared to students who had not changed subject. However, he thought his experiences of being the class representative during his four-year undergraduate programme helped him to manage learning at the Master’s level well.

In Interview 1 Mike said he was challenged by the language barrier – in both subject-situated vocabulary and everyday English – but tried to narrow the gap through additional study, and was helped by the examples and figures teachers provided. He also recognised clearly that a solid understanding of the basic subject-situated theories and concepts would be crucial to his success in the Programme:

It’s challenging when communicating with teachers. For example, you don’t know the words to describe a figure. And even the most basic vocabulary – ‘divide’ has so many ways to say... So I have to learn independently after the class. (IQ1, 140-142)

...There’re so many examples offered in the class, which usually takes up half of the class time. The teachers gave really good teaching: he teaches detailed knowledge, which makes the subject knowledge easy to understand... He’ll show us how the figure changes shape as the codes change... (IQ1, 80)

The teacher supposes you’ve known the basic knowledge and theories... So like me who didn’t know this area before, it’s quite challenging... But if you ask questions, this teacher...would give you explanations carefully and show why a figure is like this... You have to understand the basic knowledge, otherwise you don’t have questions to ask. (IQ1, 90)

Opportunities to write in English, however were limited:

We’re a hard discipline. We just write solutions, for example  $y+x=3+5$ . That’s just formula. It doesn’t make any difference whether you can write in English. The only writing I do is writing emails, informal emails. (IQ1, 144)

It was therefore not until Interview 3, when working on his Master’s project report,

that he admitted that ‘the most problematic barrier is writing in English’ (IQ3, 76).

Mike’s transitions in pedagogical culture and level of study are also in marked contrast to those of Bruce. As the Programme progressed, Mike recognised that compared to undergraduate teachers, Master’s teachers valued more the students’ role when approaching learning. In Mike’s eyes, the ‘freedom’ (IQ1, 2) found in western pedagogical culture required learners’ to take an autonomous role, choosing ‘where you can get the knowledge’ (IQ1, 2) and benefiting from teacher-student interaction:

...[In the UK, learning can be approached] by finding materials in the library, by reading the references suggested in the reading list, or by interacting with the teachers. But in China...we didn’t have lecture notes and reading lists. We only had ‘one’ textbook. So if we had problems, the ways to solve problems were limited and the resources were limited... (IQ1, 2)

In the UK, teachers like to communicate with you. They’re quite active to arrange time to make interactions with students happen, so now we have a tutorial once a week. However in China, it was students’ responsibility to make the time with the teachers. And we only have a class before the exam to ask questions to teachers... (IQ1, 120)

Between Interviews 1 and 3, Mike progressively devoted more time and effort than he had been used to doing in China. By Interview 3, from his perspective, he had a greater sense of achievement and his ‘conception of learning’ at the Master’s level was further developed by the project component.

I think this year [his Master’s year] is much more rewarding and valuable than any year in my undergraduate study... Now I’ve finished what I’m required to do in my [Master’s] project. And now it’s my job to think what I’m going to do next in my project (give my contribution to the knowledge). (IQ3, 14)

...In China, as long as your results came out, that’s fine. But in the UK, you must have your ideas why this result comes out and why this step goes to the following step... Then you can figure out how and where you can improve your programmes and make contribution to the area... I mean critical thoughts. We’re a hard discipline. So critical thinking is to improve things according to well-established knowledge... [for example, for the module of Image Processing] you should try to make this image be seen more clearly. . (IQ3, 84)

In comparison to Bruce, Mike’s success appeared to be related to his well-developed ‘conception of learning’ and ‘cultural scripts’ (Welikala and Watkins, 2008).

Therefore Mike's fully-evolved conceptions enable him to assume sufficient learner autonomy and regulate his learning, which from Vermunt and Verloop's perspective (1999), was 'congruent' with teachers' expectation.

## **5.10 Conclusion: MSc SPC**

This concluding section summarises all the previously discussed six case studies to emphasise some important emergent themes.

### *Comparisons within the MSc SPC in terms of transition in language*

#### *a) The pervasive challenge of language*

Similar to their Chinese peers on the Education programme, all research participants on this SPC Programme experienced challenges with their transitions in language, irrespective of their level of competence in English suggested by English tests. Dani especially, who was more experienced in doing international English tests than other research participants, was unable to recognise the gaps between academic and general English and between postgraduate-level discourses and the undergraduate-level kind. However, a significant gap persisted between coming to recognise what was expected of her and taking appropriate action, including (compared to her peers), interacting with teachers.

Another intriguing finding suggested that SPC students were struggling with different aspects of the language barrier at different stages: while listening and speaking in English were found to be the most challenging modes of English for all students, reading and writing became the dominant language barriers. Until Interview 3, nearly all students reported that their writing remained problematic.

#### *b) The challenge of subject-situated language when interacting with teachers*

All cases intimate that all students were challenged to understand subject-situated vocabulary and discourses when listening in class only at the beginning of the Programme. However, Dani faced this challenge longer, while Charles additionally struggled with the psychological barrier to speak English and the socio-cultural dimension of teachers' language in the class.

This challenge of subject-situated language was raised irrespective of research participants' undergraduate learning experiences in a familiar (Charles, Emily, Dani and Mike) or an unfamiliar disciplinary community (Bruce, Lillian and Mike), and irrespective of their knowledge of the academic language gained (Emily) or not gained from a pre-sessional EAP training course (all except Emily). While this challenge was helped by teachers' use of figures and examples (Mike and Emily), it seemed to be intensified in the remote video teaching. Even Emily, who had taken an EAP course, found it challenging, let alone others. However, the participants generally did not discuss it much in interviews.

Compared to speaking, these students were more likely to find listening in English challenging. This is, on the one hand, because, as all research participants recognised, this Programme did not particularly require students to demonstrate their capacities of speaking and writing. On the other hand, some cases (for example, Lillian and Emily) hint that insufficient capability to recognise what the teachers asked constrained their competence to respond to questions (speaking). The barrier of subject-specific language could not be overcome in straightforward ways – for example by checking the dictionary (Dani and Charles) or recording the class (Emily).

### *c) The challenge of subject-situated language when reading and writing in academic English*

Finally, and equally significantly, most research participants reported that by Interview 2 they were encountering challenges in reading and writing. This, as the evidence suggests, is because of the subject matter and the Programme structure when they finished the first component of exam at the end of Semester 1. The barrier of subject-situated language was burdensome for students' workload and available time consumption (Dani and Charles). It furthermore impacted on some students' initial performances in exams (Charles and Emily).

From Interview 2 to 3, all students reported that they were struggling to write in academic literacies only when writing textual discourses in exams. Therefore, by

prioritising statistics, most of them tried to avoid writing texts. For example, Emily tried to draw figures in the exam. Lillian chose questions to answer which only required statistical calculation. Academic writing remained their biggest and the dominant challenge until the end of the Programme, when they were required to write reports with regard to their final projects. Both Mike and Emily furthermore recognised the gap between professional writing and their own writing.

#### *Comparisons within the MSc SPC in terms of transition in level of study*

##### *d) The influence of 'conception of learning' and the challenge of level of studies*

Reviewing cases, apart from Bruce and Dani, all research participants progressed to their Master's level of learning smoothly (Mike, Charles) or were outstandingly successful (Emily and Lillian).

The transition in level of study of both Bruce and Dani ended in a downward spiral, and seemed related to how they perceived 'conception of learning' and the 'terms of engagement' required at the Master's level. Although they both sometimes seemed able to talk about a difference/gap between what was expected of them at the higher level of learning and the kind required at the undergraduate level, their grasp of what was required was uncertain and limited, and did not enable them to take appropriate actions to close the gap, regardless of whether they had changed subjects (Bruce) or not (Dani). Bruce's case presents an apparent contrast to Mike, because they had taken the same subject in China.

##### *e) The influence of reflective approach and self-regulation on the challenge of level of study*

Both Bruce and Dani tended to attribute their own failure to extrinsic factors. While their wish to defend themselves is understandable, it delayed the possibility of finding coping strategies to regulate their learning and their transition to Master's

study regressed faster and faster while their confidence decreased. This was particularly apparent for Dani. Compared to Bruce, Dani was more willing to take the attribution approach and she had stronger confidence at the beginning of the Programme.

*f) The influence of the ranking of students' first degree university in China on the level of study*

Reviewing Table 5.2, it is intriguing to find that, apart from Bruce and Dani, all research participants were from top-ranking undergraduate universities. It may imply that good-quality undergraduate learning experience may be related to students' preparedness for their Master's studies in terms of 'conception of learning' or 'terms of engagement' and a relatively higher level of knowledge gained from undergraduate study.

*Comparisons within the MSc SPC in terms of transition in pedagogical culture*

It seems that there was little relationship between whether a student had experienced western pedagogical culture before and the possibility of their success in progressing in the pedagogical culture transition. Unlike the *Education* informants, the *SPC* students did not talk much about this dimension of transition, for instance the requirement of critical thinking which was commonly viewed as one of the biggest challenges by their fellow students of *Education*. Instead, this dimension of transition only appears to be a significant matter for *SPC* participants when it is interwoven with their transition in level of study.



## CHAPTER SIX

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### Findings from the MSc Finance and Investment

#### **6.1 Introduction**

The previous two chapters presented findings from the *MSc Education* and the *MSc Signal Processing and Communications (SPC)*. In this third and last Findings chapter, findings from *MSc Finance and Investment* will be reported. The chapter comprises four parts – an introduction to the Programme, a brief introduction to the case studies, a detailed analysis to each case, and finally a brief outline of some important themes which emerged from the findings.

#### **6.2 Introduction to MSc Finance and Investment (FI)**

The *MSc Finance and Investment (FI)* programme is offered in the Business School, which is a part of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. In the 2009-10 academic session it was only offered on a full-time basis, and consisted of a teaching component (from 10 September to 21 December 2009 and from 16 January to 25 May 2011) and a dissertation component.

In comparison to the other two MSc programmes (*Education* and *SPC*), this Programme had specific entry expectations, namely in applicants' language competence, their working experience and previous learning experiences in a similar discipline. Only students who had gained IELTS score 7, with no score lower than 6 in each section, received unconditional offers.

This Programme is categorised as a soft applied discipline and shares both similarities and differences with the two other programmes – *Education* and *SPC*. The Programme’s distinctive features are outlined in Table 6.1, which describes aims, structure, teaching approaches and assessment methods.

As shown in Table 6.1 (on page 224), this Programme not only required students to master key theories (as did the *MSc Education*), but it also expected students to solve practical problems using statistical calculations and specialised software (which was similar to the demands of the *MSc SPC*).

All students on this Programme were expected to take four compulsory course modules in Semester 1, and three in Semester 2. They were also required to take three optional courses in the second semester. In addition to the workload in their compulsory and optional courses, each of the students involved in this study spent time preparing for Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) exams (to get a specialist analyst qualification). This is because this Programme was closely linked the CFA Institute.

Using a combination of teaching and assessment methods which featured on the *MSc Education* and the *MSc FI*, this Programme organised student learning in a variety of ways (namely, lecture, tutorial, workshop and presentation), and adopted different approaches to assessment (namely individual assignment, group assignment and final-term exam).

The individual assignment assessed each student’s essay writing skills and their ability to analyse an empirical project using real-world data. In comparison to this, the group assignment required similar analytical skills, using bigger data sets and more complex statistical and analytical skills, such as modelling. The purpose of these group assignments was to establish a collaborative environment.

Closed-book exams lasted two hours. While the mid-term exam focused on statistical calculations and took the form of multiple-choice questions, the final exam was more concerned with students' mastery of subject-specific literacies – using statistical

<b>Knowledge and understanding students were expected to gain from the Master's programme</b>		<p><b><i>MSc Finance and Investment (FI)</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students should <i>acquire theoretical knowledge</i> concerning global financial markets and the finance and investment industry; the roles of different organisations and how they interact plus the factors behind their success and failure; and the role of different asset classes.</li> <li>• They are also required to <i>have practical and numerical skills</i> to solve problems, such as how to estimate the fair value for an investment; how to test assumptions and sensitivities and compare different investments; and how portfolios of investments can be constructed and analysed.</li> </ul>
<b>Course modules</b>	<b>Semester 1</b>	Compulsory courses: Investment Mathematics; Financial Market; The Analysis of Corporate Financial Information; and Statistics for Finance
	<b>Semester 2</b>	Compulsory courses: Corporate Finance; Research Methods in Finance; and Derivatives
<b>Programme structure</b>		<p>Choose three from nine optional courses: Cases in Finance and Investment, Equity Valuation, Financial Econometrics and Quantitative Techniques, Advanced International Accounting, Portfolio Management and Investment Analysis, Public Sector Financial Management, Advanced Finance Theory, Behavioural Finance and Market Anomalies, Ethics and Corporate Governance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A total 180 credits in one academic year.</li> <li>• The teaching component: 60 credits for each semester (total 120 credits);</li> <li>• Master's dissertation: 60 credits.</li> </ul>
<b>Forms of teaching and learning Methods of assessment</b>		<p>A combination of lecture, tutorial, workshop and presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The teaching component: a combination of various means: individual assignment; group assignment; mid-term and final-term exams.</li> <li>• The research project component: a Master's dissertation.</li> </ul>

**Table 6.1** The details of *MSc FI*

calculations (just as *SPC* students were required to do) and with writing textual discourses in essay-type questions (just as *Education* students were commonly required to produce).

The Programme dissertation combined the features of the *MSc Education*'s dissertation and *SPC*'s final project: students were expected to demonstrate an ability to critically evaluate literature; choose and use appropriate research methodologies; and construct a report on a piece of empirical research. In brief, critical thinking, statistical calculation skills, independent self-directed study and collaborative learning with peers were key elements of this Programme.

### **6.3 Justification for selection of the major and minor case studies**

To provide a detailed account of how Chinese students experienced this Programme, findings from a series of in-depth interviews with seven research participants will be presented as either major or minor case studies. When selecting which students would feature in this Findings chapter several key areas were considered with regard to participants' individual differences: for example, their English competence; prior experience of using western pedagogies; their first subjects; any relevant working experience; the ranking of their undergraduate universities in China; and any experience of living away from the home. All research participants on this Programme were between 22 and 23 years old. Detailed information on each participant was compiled from their accounts in the initial interview and this is presented in Table 6.2.

Partici- pants	Gender	Levels of English		Experienced western teaching and learning approaches		Whether studied the same/similar subject and what their undergraduate subjects were		Lived away from home		The ranking of their first degree university in China	Worked between undergraduate and postgraduate degrees	
		High	Satisfactory	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		Yes	No
<i>Major Case</i>												
<b>1. Lucy</b>	Female		√		√	√ Economics		√		A top comprehensive university		√ But had had a relevant internship at a bank and a volunteer job in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games
<b>2. Dick</b>	Male		√		√		√ Logistics and Engineering	√		An average-ranked comprehensive university		√ Had never worked
<b>3. Fiona</b>	Female		√	√		√ Two degrees one in Economics the other in Management			√	An average-ranked comprehensive university		√ But had had two relevant internships at a bank and an international investment company

**Table 6.2** What research participants in *MSc FI* said about their previous experiences in China during Interview 1 (to be continued)

Partici- pants	Gender	Level of English		Experienced western teaching and learning approaches		Whether studied the same/similar subject and what their undergraduate subjects were		Lived away from home		The ranking of their first degree university in China	Worked between undergraduate and postgraduate degrees	
		High	Satisfactory	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No		Yes	No
<i>Minor Case</i>												
<b>4. Mary</b>	Female		√	√		√	Economics	√		A top-ranked finance-specialist university		√ But had had an informal internship in an accounting company
<b>5. Roy</b>	Male		√		√	√	Finance	√		A top comprehensive university		√ But had had two internships at two banks
<b>6. Nina</b>	Female		√	√		√	Finance		√	A top comprehensive university		√ But had had two internships at two banks
<b>7. Andrew</b>	Male		√	√		√	Insurance	√		A top-ranked finance-specialist university		√ But had had two internships at a bank and an accounting company

**Table 6.2. What research participants in *MSc FI* said about their previous experiences in China during Interview 1**

**Case 1:** Lucy's case provided a 'platform' for the subsequent selection of the other case studies. In summary:

- her prior experiences were similar to those of the majority of the Chinese students on this Programme namely, she had a satisfactory IELTS entry score, her first degree was in a related subject, she had relevant work experience (an internship at a bank), and she had had little experience of using western pedagogies during her undergraduate degree when learning at a top-ranked university;
- she was also unique. Although the Programme representatives were western students, Lucy was a 'leader' student among the Chinese students. This is because before she came to the UK, she had been an administrator of the QQ group (a popular online forum in China like Facebook) which had helped Chinese Master's students coming to the University of Edinburgh meet online. This experience not only assisted Lucy in knowing about most of her Chinese peers' backgrounds, but also helped her to gain the authority to unite her Chinese peers, for example suggesting that they worked together to prepare for exams and that they went on social outings. Therefore, an important feature of her interviews was the frequent use of the first person plural 'we' as well as the singular 'I';
- she had been a volunteer in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and was responsible for distributing IT resources to reporters and journalists from all over the world.

**Case 2:** In contrast to Lucy, Dick was chosen to represent the 'exceptional case', because:

- from all research participants, he was the only student who had embarked on a major subject change and had had no working experience at all;
- furthermore, although Dick had had a satisfactory IELTS score, he came to Edinburgh one month earlier than most of his Chinese peers (except Case 6. Nina) to study an EAP course offered in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences;
- Dick was the only one of the students who participated in the study who had never been a member in the QQ Group.

**Case 3:** Fiona was chosen for presentation as a major case study, because compared to other students she seemed to have more advantages. For example:

- she had experienced a western pedagogical culture in China, and her English competence had not only improved in her undergraduate study but had also strengthened when she was working in international organisations;
- from all the students who engaged in the study, she was the only one who had double-majored in two undergraduate subjects;
- Fiona (and Nina – see Case 6) were the only two students who had never previously lived away from their families.

Although it was decided that the following four cases would be presented as minor case studies, in many ways they were just as interesting.

**Case 4:** Mary was selected, because:

- from the researcher's perspective, although Mary was similar to Fiona, she had the advantage of having studied for six-months in America;
- of the participants, she was the only student who was taken care of by a friend's parents in Edinburgh.

Lucy's case was selected to provide an illustration of what could be termed a 'typical' Chinese student on this Programme. Case 5 (Roy), Case 6 (Nina) and Case 7 (Andrew) who all shared similar but in some ways contrasting backgrounds were selected as minor cases.



## **6.4 A major case study on Lucy**

### *Introduction to Lucy*

Lucy was a female student who had left her family home to study for an undergraduate degree at a highly-ranked university in China. As Table 6.2 demonstrates, her undergraduate subject – Economics – was closely related to the content of the Programme. Although she indicated that she had forgotten some prior subject knowledge, in Interview 1, Lucy did not note any particular challenges with learning. She was confident in saying that:

...I felt it was so easy to follow up the class (of the Programme). I even told myself: 'Oh, this teacher missed something that I've known already'... (IQ1, 44)

Moreover, she believed that her subject knowledge was strengthened by her internship when she was working at the Bank of China. In addition, her English competence was enhanced because of her work with the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

Lucy was very confident in terms of her ability in self-regulation and management, because in her perception being an administrator of the QQ group developed her capabilities further, but also provided her with information about learning and living in the UK. In her words, '...Regardless of the social life or academic life (in the UK), they (QQ group members) helped me a lot' (IQ1, 50).

Lucy's actual experience of transitions presents complications. While she succeeded in the Programme, was awarded the Master's degree with distinction and won a university prize, it appears that she performed more like a strategic learner. As the analysis unfolded, three transitions – in language, level of study and pedagogical culture – were particularly significant to her.

### *Lucy's transition in language*

From Lucy's perspective, her transition in language progressed smoothly from Interview 1 to 3, especially writing in English, because she gained confidence through applying different strategies to cope with the language barrier. At the beginning of the Programme, Lucy did not view the language barrier as a particular challenge, until she became involved in group discussion tasks:

...nearly every of us (Chinese students) can't write well, so when I grouped with native English speakers, it was stressful... (IQ1, 2-14)

...I found difficulties in interacting in English. I felt so down. Now I give myself some comfort that we're foreigners... Now I'm braver to talk... I'm not saying my English improves, but I have stayed with this and thought this isn't that serious... (IQ1, 99)

Lucy appeared to experience stress when she came to recognise the gap between her competence in using academic language and that of her western peers. However, she re-gained confidence through comforting herself. Her increase in confidence motivated her to practise more, which quickly allowed her to discover and adopt coping strategies:

...After my first presentation, I indeed felt that as long as we Chinese students prepare well, ours wouldn't be worse than native English speakers... (IQ1, 63)

...if we couldn't make sense in the class, we would discuss after the class in Chinese... I'm not saying we have problems in talking with native English speakers, but it's more convenient to talk with someone in Chinese... (IQ1, 16)

Lucy proposed that the Chinese students should group together as a Chinese learning community to help them to cope with the language barrier which she encountered with her western peers. While Lucy found that this helped her to understand in class, an unexpected consequence was that it created a gap between her and other cultural and ethnic groups. She was dismayed to see that there were '...pictures on Facebook that some of my non-Chinese cohort-mates had a party. None of them is a Chinese...' (IQ1, 6).

...We really want to get involved with them (the western peers)... that's all because of cultures and language... It's really helpful to talk with Chinese cohort-mates (about learning), easier to understand... But it couldn't be like this forever, as it may make others feel that we – the Chinese – are a group exclusive to others... (IQ1, 16)

It appears therefore that Lucy's response to dealing with the language barrier she encountered in her academic learning led to challenges with her transition in living and learning overseas. The quotation above reveals that non-Chinese students seemed to misunderstand her intentions, and concluded that the Chinese students were exclusive in their social lives as well as in their academic lives. Her western peers' activities, which excluded Chinese students, disappointed Lucy, which may have widened the cultural gap. Even though Lucy was aware of this negative consequence, her subsequent interviews do not suggest that she found an alternative (and possibly less divisive) way of coping with the language challenges.

In Interview 2, having relied on selecting additional reading along with her wider reading, she noticed that overall her reading in English had improved. However, this was not case with her writing and speaking in English:

...When you have group discussions, you don't know how to put ideas into words. So we have to keep silent. It's not because we don't know, it's just because we can't express... (IQ2, 72)

...It (the exam) is two hours but accounting for 70% of final marks... Statistics calculations are alright... We're much more afraid of essay-type questions... (So) I summarised readings and knowledge, but I didn't do this only for exams... I memorized it for exams, but I did it for understanding... (IQ2, 60)

These two extracts deserve attention because they demonstrate that, while the limited time allocated to exams increased, Lucy's difficulties with coping with the language barrier continued, and they therefore diminished her ability to practise subject-specific literacies, especially textual discourses. This appears to be a contradiction in Lucy's journey: she used memorization strategically for different learning purposes. To cope with the language barriers encountered in exams, she relied on 'mechanical memorization' (Marton et al., 1996). However, she did not stop learning, but applied a deeper approach: memorization with understanding (Marton et al., 1996). The transcript also indicates that she tried to avoid the language barrier strategically by choosing more statistical questions than essay-type questions. This response is similar to findings reported for *FI* students:

statistical symbols can also function as an ‘international language’ in this Programme, just as they do in *FI*, which makes it easier for students such as Lucy to understand.

Moreover, after Interview 2 the language barrier was no longer a recurring theme, as Lucy had developed an awareness that the most important thing was that she could demonstrate her understanding. In her words, ‘(UK) teachers are looking for your content rather than English language... they’ve been aware that we are international students.’ (IQ2, 70).

*Lucy’s transition in level of study and transition in pedagogical culture*

Just as her transition in language progressed smoothly and steadily between Interviews 1 and 3, so were the transitions in level of study and pedagogical culture equally unproblematic. However, as is suggested in a later section, *Lucy’s performances on practising subject-specific literacies*, her understanding of the ‘terms of engagement’ and ‘conception of learning’ were only sufficient to support her progression in the teaching component of the Programme; she struggled with the dissertation component.

In Interview 1, Lucy recognised what was expected of her with Master’s level study, in her words ‘...Although you’re learning in the class, what you do after the class is most significant ...’ (IQ1, 22-26). However, she also noted that she did not take action and do the required reading after class:

...The teacher doesn’t explain exemplars in the lecture at the postgraduate level, he leaves to us. But I didn’t read... This is not good. I should read. (IQ1, 63)

...Previously I thought as long as I understood what teachers taught in the class, that was enough. However, it isn’t enough... In the UK... you’re also expected to ask questions. Apparently, none of students who ask questions in the class is Chinese... (IQ1, 77-79)

Lucy was clearly aware that increased learning autonomy was required at this level of study in the UK in comparison to her undergraduate degree in China. She also revealed that while she understood that teachers in the UK expect Master’s students to interact with them and ask questions, and that this is part of the pedagogical culture, neither she nor her

Chinese peers interacted with their teachers. Thus it appears that her ‘cultural scripts’ (Welikala and Watkins, 2008) were not fully developed. This may be because she initially believed that learning through interaction was only helpful for her to ‘...learn from others. They’re from different backgrounds and working experiences...’ (IQ1, 93), rather than realising that she was also expected to offer her own contributions. However, Lucy’s subsequent accounts in Interview 2 indicated that her ‘cultural scripts’ had developed:

...Teaching-learning is an interactive process. It isn’t only requiring teachers to ask questions. We also should propose questions actively. (IQ2, 4)

...Teachers (in the UK) are looking for your unique ideas and checking whether you have dug something out at a deeper level... (IQ2, 40)

She understood that engaging in critical thinking was more complicated than just recognising it. Lucy admitted that ‘...Chinese students rarely do well in critical thinking. We have been used to learning in the Chinese spoon-fed way...’ (IQ2, 6). Interestingly, she was clearly aware of the opportunities that interactions between peers provided such as opportunities for students to engage in and develop their skills in critical thinking:

...good group work requires you to propose your ideas according to others’ feedback....  
Critical thinking should be made through interactions... (IQ2, 2)

However, while Lucy appeared to accept and understand the value western pedagogies for learning:

...it (group discussions) gives you feeling of achievement and unforgettable experiences... (IQ2, 56)

She continued to experience difficulties with assuming learner autonomy especially at the dissertation stage and with interactions with her teachers.

...I learnt hard in Semester 1 because I knew nothing about exam system in the UK. Now I’ve experienced it so I lost motivations... (IQ2, 30)

...he (my supervisor) didn’t say my topic was alright for sure... I’m expecting he could say ‘Yes, you can do something with it’... I really think teachers are just supervising while students are the key role... (IQ3, 60)

These extracts suggest that having acknowledged that there were problems with her understanding of what was expected of her in exams in Interview 1, Lucy increased the amount of assignment practice she did which undoubtedly helped her to understand how to use coping strategies to satisfy the expectations of subject-specific literacies in exams. However, she appeared to be unable to respond in this way when it came to the dissertation. One reason for this may be a result of her initial narrow understanding of ‘conceptions of learning’ and ‘terms of engagement’ which led to a regression in her transitions in pedagogical culture and level of study. So, even by the time of Interview 3, she still expected considerable teacher regulation.

*Lucy’s performances on practising subject-specific literacies*

Between Interviews 1 and 2, Lucy’s developing understanding of what she was expected to do in group work can be seen from a comparison of her accounts in different phases of the interview:

...We should get our own part of work. After we finish it, we should come back together to compose them as a PPT... (IQ1, 12)

...The reason why we, unlike other groups, didn’t split parts between two different people is because that they have connections... If we split them, I couldn’t propose suggestions to my group members... because I didn’t know their parts... (IQ2, 2)

It appears that Lucy had a good understanding of what was required for an effective collaboration on a group assignment. Students should not work independently on component parts and then bring them together in a mechanical way. Instead, they should work together throughout in a critical and collaborative way which would mean that each of them made suggestions and were familiar with and understood each of the component parts.

However, in Interview 2 sceptical feelings about the value of group assignments appear to have surfaced again, although at different points in her interviews she seemed to suggest that she valued this assessment method (suggested in IQ2, 56, on page 218):

...We’ve tried our best to do this group assignment, but the score’s still [not good]... It

might be because our academic backgrounds in the group are similarly average... (IQ2, 40)

In addition to the group assignments, she also gained confidence and a sense of achievement by performing very well in exams:

My achievement is the exam result. I'm the only student in my Programme who got four distinctions... This is because I'm good at summarising, or maybe I'm good at answering exams... (IQ2, 66)

Interestingly, although by Interview 3 it was clear that she was struggling to propose any ideas about how to write up a dissertation, she still won a university scholarship.

### *Summary of Lucy's case*

Given the fact that Lucy was advantaged in having prior subject knowledge and work-related experiences, she actually experienced difficulties in her transitions in language, pedagogical study and level of study.

Analysis of Interviews 1 and 2 reveals that Lucy had demonstrated an outstanding performance with her progress in her Master's learning. Nevertheless, in the later stages of the Programme, Lucy appeared to be 'temporising' (Perry, 1970) and it could be argued that she had regressed when attempting to recognise what was expected of her. There are several possible interpretations of Lucy's performance. First, Lucy's 'cultural scripts' (Welikala and Watkins, 2008) and conception of learning were still narrow and insufficiently evolved to enable her to close the gap between her undergraduate learning and learning in the Master's teaching component. Thus, from Vermunt and Verloop's perspective (1999), Lucy's expectation of having a high degree of teacher regulation in the dissertation element of the Programme was incompatible with the teacher's expectation of intermediate or high degrees of student-regulated learning. Second, in comparison to term assignments and exams, the Master's dissertation focused more on constructing and organizing an extended piece of academic writing, which was Lucy's first experience of writing in this way. Third, it may be that Lucy performed well in

group work and interacting with peers and that this was her preferred way of learning rather than working alone on the dissertation.



## **6.5 A major case study on Dick**

### *Introduction to Dick*

As Table 6.2 demonstrates, of all the research participants, Dick, a male student, was the only student who had had no work experience and had also embarked on a major subject change. However, as his initial interview suggests, what he had learned from his first subject (Logistics and Engineering) made him ‘...feel that the knowledge (taught in the Programme) isn’t that strange...’ (IQ1, 276).

After receiving an unconditional offer he took an EAP course, which was offered to all new students in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. While this experience met Dick’s expectations when beginning his transition in living and studying abroad, he did not mention its influence on his transition in language.

As his initial interview indicates, Dick had not experienced western pedagogical culture and he had been an autonomous learner since his undergraduate study. In his view, ‘...Learning is you paying to go to a buffet. You choose to eat/learn what you like...’ (IQ1, 27). Moreover, he had left home for his four-year undergraduate study, so in his words ‘...My previous leaving home experience definitely was related to my current adaptation (in Edinburgh)’ (IQ1, 112-118).

### *Dick’s transition in language*

Although Dick met the entry requirement with regard to language competence, he experienced difficulties with language, especially with writing in subject-specific literacies.

In Interview 1, Dick believed that his English learning was much better than that of his Chinese peers. He thought that most of the Chinese students were ‘not brave enough to talk in the class’ (IQ1, 335-340), while he was proud of ‘live(ing) with foreigners (native

English speakers) for one month (during the EAP study)' (IQ1, 118). Although Dick may have been unaware of the difference between everyday language and academic language, it may be that his confidence grew as a result of the improvement in his everyday language which may have built his confidence when interacting with his subject specialist teachers.

Later, however, he recognised that there was a gap between everyday English and academic English:

...The amount I take six hours to read is still not as much as English speakers read in three-hours. (IQ1, 322)

...I was told by a Scottish student that nearly all the Chinese students couldn't write the kind of work he did – good and professional... And it (this shortcoming) probably couldn't be worked out in this one-year programme... (IQ1, 322-326)

This language barrier not only created difficulties and increased his workload, it also appeared to impact adversely on Dick's confidence because he recognised that this gap was unlikely to close within one year, the duration of the Master's Programme, and also that he was unfamiliar with some subject-specific vocabulary:

Language would become a more serious problem if you listen to the Maths... I should learn some economics terms... But Statistics is only about numbers with four symbols... (IQ1, 78)

Dick recognised that this could be more of a problem in some course modules. Those which involved less 'international language' could become a serious problem for him while others which were more symbolic were less likely to be so challenging. Therefore, when being asked to choose questions in the Semester 1 exams, like Lucy, Dick was more likely to choose to answer the statistical questions as opposed to the essay-type questions.

In Interview 2, Dick believed that his English competence had improved to some extent because 'the content taught in this semester (Semester 2) has lots of similarities with that

of the last semester. They're even repetitive...' (IQ2, 26). Nevertheless, he still experienced difficulties when listening to the class and reading after the class. However, he quickly seemed to find coping strategies:

...Normally, I listen to the class and before the exam. I would check my cohort-mates' notes. (IQ2, 76)

I would read the abstract first and then go to read the conclusion... (The problematic point is) they're academic articles, so... inherently difficult. And they become even more difficult when they're written in English. (IQ2, 41-44)

The preceding evidence suggests that Dick's problems with English hindered his ability to gain command of the new subject knowledge, which was already difficult, and lack of familiarity with the knowledge increased the language barrier.

By Interview 3, Dick reported that challenges had arisen from reading and writing during the dissertation, because he had realised that the selective-reading coping strategy he had adopted earlier in the Programme no longer helped him. In his words, '...You have to prepare a literature review. It's not enough for you to just read the abstract...' (IQ3, 234). Furthermore the language barrier constrained his capacity to demonstrate his ability to think critically, which is a requirement at Master's level study. In his words 'Although I have my own views, I don't know how to put them into words properly...' (IQ3, 120). Thus, by Interview 3, it is evident that Dick was once again experiencing real challenges with the language demands of Master's level study.

#### *Dick's transitions in subject*

As the preceding analysis reveals, Dick's change of subject had a negative impact on his transition in language. In discussion with his Chinese peers who did not change their main subject, Dick learned that what disadvantaged him was not the subject change, but the higher levels of knowledge required.

Surprisingly, Dick revealed his confidence and suggested a possible strategy for closing this gap:

There's no problem or anything bad about subject change... (IQ1, 271)

...previously, I didn't like this module. But when I talked with some cohort-mates who had had work experience... (I found) it was useful. So I'm working harder on it. (IQ1, 154)

The preceding extract deserves attention, because it describes how Dick coped with the transition in subject: because he lacked prior subject knowledge, he was less able to recognise what was expected of him. Nevertheless to close this gap, he interacted with peers who had a better-developed disciplinary understanding, which helped him to realise the course-specific requirements and take appropriate action:

When learning the course modules similar to social science subjects, it requires...lots of reading and...remember(ing) quickly. But Mathematics only requires me to do questions (to practise how to calculate). (IQ1, 220)

After Interview 1, Dick did not allude to the challenge of changing subjects. From the researcher's perspective, this may be related to his increasing knowledge of the Programme, the subject-specific discourses and 'ways of thinking and practising' (McCune and Hounsell, 2005), which are discussed in a later section, *performances on practising subject-specific literacies*. However because of the subject change, he experienced complex feelings: both in confidence and uncertainty about his ability to succeed in the Programme:

...I knew what I was expected to give in exams. (But) what I wrote (still) couldn't beat others (who didn't change subject)... (IQ2, 12)

*Dick's transition in pedagogical culture, transition in level of study and his performances on practising student-specific literacies*

From Interview 1 to 3, the transcripts suggest that Dick progressed well through the challenges in transitions in pedagogical culture and level of study. At the beginning of

the Programme, Dick was aware of the gap between learning in different pedagogical cultures:

Honestly, the teaching I received in China was the content teachers would put on our exam papers... (IQ1, 95-98)

Teaching in China focused on the depth of knowledge...while teaching in the UK is more emphasising on the breadth of knowledge. That's the differences of teaching, and also the differences of learning. That's why Chinese students find it hard to adapt. (IQ1, 2)

The preceding extracts indicate that Dick's conceptions of learning and teaching were closely related as two sides of one coin: from his perspective, for Chinese students, the western pedagogies created particular challenges. This is because the Chinese students' conception of learning and approaches to learning had been shaped by Chinese pedagogical culture, which is exam-orientated and teacher-regulated. There may be also a gap resulting from different levels of study. However, coming from a Chinese pedagogical culture, it was interesting to note that Dick appeared to favour western approaches which value autonomous, independent learning:

For me, learning in China and learning in the UK are the same – I rely on myself... So I don't care about teaching... But I care about learning... independent learning. (IQ1, 23-27)

The researcher was surprised to find that despite the fact that Dick appeared initially to be the least advantaged student at the beginning of the Programme, his conception of learning appeared to be in line with what the Programme required:

...The more reading you've done, the more knowledge you would get. It's not difficult, but you should connect every single point together as a theoretical framework... (IQ1, 152)

...in the UK, you have to write about your personal understanding of the knowledge... (IQ2, 2)

These extracts demonstrate that Dick's awareness of the gap in his conceptions of learning across different pedagogical cultures was advanced. He recognised that he was expected

to read autonomously to achieve deep learning and engage in critical thinking, especially at Master's level. In his words '...at the postgraduate level, teachers expect me to present critical awareness in the exams. That means I need to read ...' (IQ2, 67).

However, practising critical thinking was more complicated than he had anticipated:

I think my own ideas were still not enough. I didn't expect to only get this score... I thought I had memorized everything. (IQ2, 144)

The requirement for critical thinking, which is explored in the review of literature, is challenging even for British students. For Dick this proved to be a real difficulty: not only had he changed subjects but, because of his undergraduate experience, he had not been trained to think critically. Therefore, lack of prior subject knowledge, together with lack of experience of criticality, meant that Dick's experience of transition was particularly challenging.

Furthermore, Dick did not think that the Programme helped, because of the large class size and what, in his opinion, was an inappropriate assessment design. In his words:

... unlike essays...The exam questions are repeated from year to year. (IQ3, 108)

...The exam requires us to write the name of authors and the years of reference... That's a requirement in nearly every course module. I have to memorize. But usually I can't... (IQ3, 56)

Although from the researcher's perspective, the language difficulties he experienced with writing extended essays, and the need to memorize and reproduce large amounts of information in exams, may be directly related to the challenging subject matter, when comparing this extract to his earlier account (IQ2, 67 on page 227) the result of this was that Dick had lost the motivation to learn.

However, Dick's motivation to learn seemed to return when the Programme progressed to the dissertation component, because:

...I feel the rewards I get from this (dissertation) component are much more than what I

got from the teaching... (IQ3, 70)

Apparently, he was able to assume increased learner autonomy and there was evidence of a sense of personal responsibility, because he believed that ‘I’m everything... The supervisor only exists when you have questions...’ (IQ3, 236). As a consequence, his confidence grew when his understanding of what subject-specific literacies called for increased:

A good dissertation (in this Programme) should be like the articles in the magazine: background, hypothesis, reasons why you build up this hypothesis, the value of this hypothesis, data, methodology, literature review and conclusion. You can write as long as you have done enough reading. (IQ3, 240-242)

However like Lucy, he was sceptical about the value of group assignments:

I really don't know how to finish a group assignment... that all depends on luck... It's just because in my group there's an outstanding student... (IQ3, 220)

### *Summary of Dick's case*

Despite the fact that Dick had a considerable subject change, analysis of his interviews indicates that he coped well with his difficulties. When the Programme commenced, he experienced significant challenges and struggles. As Interview 2 suggests, although he had made some progress, he plateaued. However, because he actively assumed learner autonomy and adopted a reflective approach to responding to the gaps, he progressed successfully. As a result of his increasing familiarity with a new pedagogical culture, together with his developed disciplinary character and ‘ways of thinking and practising’ (McCune and Hounsell, 2005), his problems reduced over time. The initial problems which arose from his change of subject and the impact that this had on other transition – in language and level of study – were reduced because of the positive steps he took to take responsibility and he therefore successfully navigated the transition and ultimately coped well. This may be the result of his high-level ‘conception of learning’, his understanding of the ‘terms of engagement’ required for Master’s level study, and his ability to regulate his own learning, which matched to the teachers’ expectations and led to what Vermunt and Verloop (1999) term ‘congruence’.

## **6.6 A major case study on Fiona**

### *Introduction to Fiona*

Fiona was a 22-year-old female student, who had not previously left her home town. Before coming to the UK, Fiona had had two internships, working at the International Department of Bank of China and with an international investment company. In addition, she had experienced western pedagogies in China. Because her undergraduate programme had been a joint programme with an Australian university, in the third year Fiona was taught subject knowledge in English by Australian teachers from the University of Technology, Sydney. As a result, Fiona not only gained two Bachelors' degrees – Economics awarded by the University of Shanghai and Management awarded by the University of Technology, Sydney – she also had gained insights into and experience of western pedagogies:

... (In my undergraduate study) we did presentation and group discussions in English, so I'm not afraid of speaking English... it made me feel familiar with subject terminologies (encountered in the UK)... (IQ1, 34)

While Fiona came to the UK with great confidence, she experienced problems coping with all dimensions of transition, and these difficulties damaged her confidence.

### *Fiona's transition in Language*

As close analysis of her interviews progressed, it reveals that Fiona became 'stuck' in three of the four modes of language – speaking, reading and writing, especially writing subject-specific discourses.

In Interview 1, despite Fiona's expectations (suggested in the preceding quotation IQ1, 34), she encountered difficulties with understanding academic discourses and acquiring the academic literacies which were essential for successful study at postgraduate level:

...Understanding the teachers' teaching doesn't only mean that we can understand if the teachers speak in Chinese or we can't understand if the teachers speak in English. We have different ways of thinking... (IQ1, 98)



'I had challenges in writing. It wasn't only found in my undergraduate writing. It's also a challenge right now (writing in the Programme). We (the western and the Chinese people) have different ways of writing... (IQ1, 36)

It appears that from her perspective the language barrier also created a gap between her and her UK teachers:

... It's probably because of language. In China, at least I knew where my teachers' offices were... (But) The UK teachers go nowhere after the class and I have no reasons to talk to them... (IQ1, 86)

Fiona's transition in language was closely interwoven with her transitions in pedagogical culture and in level of study: Fiona appeared to be unaware of the 'terms of engagement' required between the UK teachers and their Master's students. However, what she said did not make sense: it was hard to believe that it was difficult for her as a Master's student to find out where her UK teachers' offices were. It may indeed be the case that she was aware of how to meet and talk with her UK teachers face-to-face, but that she did not feel confident about approaching them. To maintain self-worth, she attributed her difficulties as a Master's student to others – to the language barrier, to 'different ways of thinking' and to her UK teachers.

Her lack of confidence in interacting with western people was also evident when she was engaged in group discussion:

...I don't know how to communicate with western cohort-mates... Even though I know how to express ideas using the right English words, I don't know how I should talk to them... YY (an English-speaking student in the group) may think he and we are not at the same level... XX (another English-speaking student) asked him to group with us. He said NO... and told us: 'You don't need to prepare, I'll do it.'... He only discussed with XX. I'm so frustrated... I didn't dare to tell what I knew... He thought he was a big man. (IQ1, 90)

Fiona struggled to find solutions to this situation, and this unresolved problem reduced her confidence. This may also provide some insight into why Fiona appeared to be isolated

from the group. First, from Fiona's viewpoint, her western peer under-valued her contribution, because he equated her English competence to her knowledge to the subject. An alternative interpretation however may also be possible: Davies (2009) suggests that western students' unwillingness to work with non-English speakers may be because they worry that in such a group they will be scored lower. So when a western student is forced to join such a group, he or she may try to dominate it to achieve a higher score.

In Interview 2, Fiona seemed to avoid interacting with her western peers:

...I don't improve much in speaking... My communications with English native speakers are limited, because I'd like to talk with a Chinese person who gives me more sense of familiarity... (IQ2, 79-85)

As a consequence, her confidence dropped further, because she found that her English did not improve as much as she had expected:

...I had already got enough knowledge on how to write a good assignment in the western context (from my undergraduate study)... (But) Until now, my writing doesn't improve... I can't handle it... (IQ2, 45)

Fiona clearly understood what was expected of her, but she nevertheless failed to use that understanding to help her to close this gap.

#### *Fiona's transition in level of study and transition in pedagogical culture*

Not only did Fiona's response to the challenges she encountered in her language transition appear to hinder her improvement with language, it also impacted adversely on her transitions in level of study and pedagogical culture. Fiona's undergraduate experience helped her to recognise the gap more readily than other research participants: that greater expectations of student autonomy in learning was a key and important difference in level of studies as well as a pedagogical difference. In her own words:

...undergraduate teaching is to...give students ways to resolve problems. However at the Master's level, teaching is to give students the topic – big and general... (IQ1, 4)

...in the UK, teachers...only taught by bullet points. So I have to read after the class to look for the detail if I want to learn deeper... In China students got a big amount of knowledge from teachers... (IQ1, 2)

While Fiona acknowledged she was more comfortable within the teacher-regulated environment in China, she realised that she was expected to read autonomously. Yet it proved difficult to take action to close this gap, even though she had learned the knowledge:

...Reading articles is much more difficult than reading textbooks. It's not only difficult to understand, it's more time-consuming... (IQ1, 58)

When Fiona was challenged with reading academic English, she came to recognise that reading subject-specific academic articles was even more difficult and time-consuming than reading textbooks. In contrast, in some other modules which did not require wide reading, Fiona found it less challenging, because '...it's only necessary to do questions and calculations...' (IQ1, 64). Despite the fact that she was well aware of the greater expectations of learner autonomy when working at Master's level, she struggled to recognise another expectation – critical thinking. At times she appeared to recognise the gap but attributed her problems to the fact that, while western students were trained to think critically, Chinese students were not:

...the Chinese students are educated in the "Chinese" way" – the teacher-centered context...so they aren't good at giving critical perspectives. But the western students have been trained in this way... (IQ1, 45)

Her uncertainty was evident when she considered critical thinking in the context of teachers' marking criteria:

...I'm not sure (what makes a good Master's student)... you need to present your argument with persuasive evidence. But according to others (my Chinese peers), a good Master's student is to get distinctions. (IQ1, 76)

Fiona's uncertainty may suggest that her conception of learning still reflected an undergraduate perspective and Chinese pedagogical culture. This is because, when

compared to an earlier quotation (IQ1, 2, on page 232), drawing on Marton and Säljö's (2005) distinction between increasing knowledge and reconstructing knowledge, Fiona was more likely to have a low-level conception of learning – learning for a quantitative increase in knowledge (gained by wide reading), rather than going further to a higher level – reconstructing the knowledge as her own (achieved by critical thinking). As the earlier quotation suggests (IQ1, 2, on page 232), in Fiona's mind, wide reading was an optional task, only to be undertaken if she had a need to learn further. However, as is noted in the **review of literature**, reading widely and critically is a key requirement for a successful Master's student, because this helps students to develop their skills in critical thinking.

As a consequence, Fiona's 'cultural script' (Welikala and Watkins, 2008) and conception of learning became 'stuck' between Interviews 1 to 3. She attributed her perceived failure to her western teachers and their teaching approaches which did not work for her:

...I can't accept this (UK) way of teaching... In China, teachers would list and explain all the theoretical concepts...and...summarise key bulletins of knowledge according to their readings. This UK teacher's teaching is unstructured and lacking in focus and ways of thinking... (IQ2, 6)

#### *Fiona's performances on practising subject-specific literacies*

Fiona's insecure grasp of subject-specific literacies can be better presented how she performed in exams. Like Lucy and Dick, despite the fact that Fiona was sceptical about the requirements of group assignments, she was more positive about them in comparison to exams. Agreeing with Dick, Fiona suggested that inappropriate assessment design made exams particularly challenging for her: 'I didn't expect the exam in this year to be exactly the same as the sample questions on the last year's papers...' (IQ3, 63). However, although she did not anticipate accurately what would be covered in the exam, she revealed that the teacher had suggested additional reading covering the questions that would be asked but that she did not do this reading:

I did this module's exam really really bad. The questions I prepared he didn't examine. All the exam questions he examined, I didn't prepare... His questions can be found in the further reading what he suggested us to read, but I didn't read. So I didn't know

anything... (IQ3, 45)

Because of this she did not do well in the exam.

However, despite the fact that she preferred group work, the rewards she achieved from group assignments were limited for two reasons. First, based on the preceding evidence, Fiona had difficulties and a limited understanding of what was expected of her when practising subject-specific literacies. Second, from Davies' point of view (2009), she was more likely to be a 'free rider':

...This native speaker was too weak to be a "qualified" English native speaker... It's the English native speakers' responsibility to compose all the pieces of individual writings together as a coherent article ... (IQ2, 43)

I was grouped with some good group members...who did everything before I made sense what the topic was about... So I learnt little from this group assignment... (IQ3, 49-51)

It is interesting to see that from Fiona's perspective, because her first language was not English, it was the English native speakers' responsibility to take charge of the group work. According to Davies (2009), the culturally-diverse groups which are composed of native English speakers and non-English native speakers lead to an understandable but an unfair result: most of the written work is left to the students with the best language fluency. However, this 'disjunctive task' (Davies, 2009, p. 569), as highlighted in the preceding extract, resulted in a negative experience for Fiona because she did not contribute to the group work.

### *Summary of Fiona's case*

Although she had several advantages when compared to her peers, Fiona encountered challenges with her transitions in language and level of study. Despite having a secure command of English, she encountered a language barrier and was unable to close the gap. As a result, her confidence reduced significantly. Moreover, although she had previously learned in a western pedagogical culture, her 'cultural script' (Welikala and Watkins, 2008), conception of learning and understanding of 'terms of engagement' were still

'stuck' in the mindset of an undergraduate student. She sought increased teacher regulation, which did not meet the Programme's expectations for more autonomous and self-regulated learning. This mis-match resulted in 'destructive friction' (Vermunt and Verloop, 1999), which exacerbated the rapid regression in her transitions and led to a further drop in her confidence.

## **6.7 A minor case study on Mary**

### *Introduction to Mary*

As Table 6.2 indicates, Mary appeared to be in the most advantageous position to succeed as a Master's student in all dimensions of transition, for four reasons. First, her good capacity of self-regulation and management had enabled her to become an autonomous learner:

...There isn't a difference between undergraduate and postgraduate learning. Since entering the university, we all study on our own. (IQ1, 6)

Second, before coming to the UK, she had joined in the QQ Group, which, according to her accounts, helped her life in the UK. Third, her friend's parents who had been living in Edinburgh for years looked after her. Finally and the most importantly, in her third undergraduate year, she had gone to America as a visiting student for six months to study four course modules which were related to her first degree – Economics.

Actually, her transitions appeared to be problematic in level of study, pedagogical culture and language.

### *Mary's transition in level of study, transition in pedagogical culture and transition in language*

In Interview 1, Mary came to recognise the gap: learning by using western pedagogies required more learner autonomy and more interaction to promote critical thinking:

...Learning overseas trains students...discussion and presentation train students to learn more actively... Presentations help students to think critically in English and use good logic... (IQ1, 2)

However, there were other indications that she was challenged:

I don't want to say something (in the discussion) because I don't know what to say. It may be due to my ideas and my language. (IQ1, 83)

...Interaction makes teaching not 'dry'... It makes people feel comfortable. I don't

need to have interaction with teachers. It's enough if other students have... (IQ2, 123)

As the second extract above suggests, Mary's 'cultural scripts' (Welikala and Watkins, 2008) had not yet evolved sufficiently: from her viewpoint, interaction was teacher-regulated to avoid the class becoming bored, rather than a student-regulated context to inspire critical thinking.

Her attempts to close the gap were not appropriate, for unlike other students, she did not find support from her better-performing peers or UK teachers:

R: What will you do if you have difficulties in learning?

Mary: ...It's alright if I can't cope. Or I talk with my mom, then everything is gonna be fine.

R: Why mom?

Mary: There's a saying 'find mom if you have problems'. There's no 'why'. (IQ2, 225)

As she herself hinted, she was reluctant to face the consequences of not closing the gap: 'My self-discipline is bad. I like having fun, so I don't always read...' (IQ2, 40).

Although Mary did not fail any course modules and she claimed her marks stayed at the same average or below-average level from Semester 1 to 2, her transition did not run smoothly and it is noteworthy that her interviews make no mention of what was expected of her in practising subject-specific literacies.



## **6.8 A minor case study on Roy**

### *Introduction to Roy*

Roy, a male student who had left home after high school, believed he had been an outstandingly successful autonomous undergraduate learner and his self-regulation capability had been further boosted by working at the student union. Moreover, his subject change from Finance was only slight.

From Interview 1, the researcher was impressed by Roy's frequent use of a reflective approach. For example, in comparing his experiences in China and the UK, he recognised the gap between levels of studies and between pedagogical cultures: since the knowledge offered in class at Master's level was relatively general (IQ1, 80) and limited in scope (IQ2, 74), autonomy was even more important at the postgraduate learning in the UK to round out one's understanding through individual study and reflection, and so close the gap:

R: How will you respond to challenges?

Roy: I'll see what I can do. (If I failed,) I would share my experience with others... Then I can know...what I haven't done enough of... If my academic performance isn't good, I'll try another way (to learn)... (IQ1, 150)

...All scores were released on the WebCT... You can read (from it) what your ranking is (in the Programme)... I think my ranking is okay. Then I reviewed how I learnt and confirmed that my learning approaches were appropriate. (IQ2, 100)

Roy also seems to demonstrate a high-level conception of learning that includes an understanding of how to practise critical thinking:

... I'm not saying reading is difficult to do. There aren't so many hard (English) words... What you need is to have a whole understanding of an article. You should have your own ideas... (IQ1, 94)

...Doing critical thinking doesn't mean you only summarise (others' arguments). You

should check how they gave their arguments. And according to theirs, you give your own critical evaluations. Did they propose their arguments appropriately and properly? Is there any evidence? (IQ2, 108)

Roy found his biggest challenge was language, although the transcripts suggest that he progressed through this transition smoothly, from Interview 1 when he had difficulties understanding teachers' English accents to Interview 3 when he had improved in reading, listening, speaking and even writing in academic discourses. He found strategies for coping with language challenges (for example, choosing, like Lucy and Dick, to choose statistical questions in exams rather than essay-type ones) but he also continued to recognise the benefits of western pedagogy (especially group discussions) even when he found it hard:

...in the discussion, you'll see how western students perceive this topic, how they interact with teachers, what perspectives and ways of thinking they take to do assignments... We didn't have (group discussions) in China... (IQ2, 14)

...[But] It's easier to communicate with Chinese peers... (IQ3, 108)

## 6.9 A Minor case study on Nina

### *Introduction to Nina*

When Nina came to the UK, it was her first time away from home. She came to Edinburgh one month early to take a pre-sessional EPA course [English for MBA] even though her IELTS score had met the standard required. While she did not find that her English improved, this course helped her to ‘overcome this adaptation stage [a psychological barrier to using English] before my Programme study...’ (IQ1, 64).

As Nina’s initial transcript suggests, she had been an autonomous student: ‘[undergraduate] students have been supposed to read...’ (IQ1, 66). As Table 6.2 indicates, Nina thought that her first-degree subject was related to the Master’s subject, but she did not think her internships relevant; and even though she had experienced western pedagogies as an undergraduate, she felt they had been too few to help her UK learning. Nevertheless, Nina coped well with all transitions, three of which – in language, level of study and pedagogical culture – were interwoven and especially important to her.

While Nina thought she overcame the psychological barrier to use English, she had difficulties in understanding the subject vocabulary:

...I know what this terminology means in Chinese. But I get lost when reading its English version... I have to go to ask my western peers then I get my memory back... Oh that’s it! (IQ1, 2)

She also noticed that the language challenges increased when she tried to meet the Programme’s academic expectations, for which she did not feel well-prepared:

...They (my group members) are all native English speakers and our group discussions were like debates. If you spoke English slowly, you would be interrupted...especially in our subject, everyone’s ambitious... (IQ1, 200)

...it’s been quite hard to understand the essay itself. How can I give my ideas? I think the Chinese students have two shortcomings: one is our ways of thinking are different from the western, so we’re less likely to give our ideas. And the other one is we read less... (IQ2, 128)

By Interview 3, however, the language challenge remained only with respect to written work:

... I don't think I make much improvement in writing, because in the group work my English-speaking peers are always the final writers [despite having made good progress in academic writing, my English-speaking peers will always outshine me in their written work]... (IQ2, 160)

...Because our first language isn't English, we aren't sensitive to English names and references... We have to memorize (when preparing the exams)... (IQ3, 176)

From Interview 1 to 3, Nina consistently proposed that her postgraduate study was much more challenging than her undergraduate study. Not only because Nina was expected to assume greater autonomy to do critical thinking, wide reading and following up international events, the less teacher-directed pedagogical culture also brought particular difficulties. The locally contextualised subject knowledge frustrated her: 'I never learnt this theory before... I searched it on the Chinese website but nothing came out. So I think the Chinese people aren't really concerned about this but it appears often in Europe and America...' (IQ1, 2). Yet in reality, she succeeded in closing this gap between Interview 1 ['I'm forcing myself to read the Financial Times...' (IQ1, 168)] and Interview 3 ['I think I've gained 50-60% improvements in every quality (wide reading, critical thinking and following international events)...' (IQ3, 33)]. Her 'conception of learning' was advanced, and she had a good awareness of the expectations of subject-specific literacies:

...Previously I only memorized the knowledge yet understood it. I did this because I thought as long as I memorized clearly I could use it in the future as I liked. But actually that's wrong. You're able to use knowledge only if you have a good understanding of it... (IQ3, 33)

...You need to...list all existing arguments about this strategy and how they inform your application...[to] give accurate calculations situated in a specific context...[and] to bring critical ideas to this strategy... (IQ3, 17)

## 6.10 A minor case study on Andrew

### *Introduction to Andrew*

Andrew, the only student who lived in non-university accommodation among all *FI* participants, felt well-prepared to learn in the Programme in the initial interview, as Table 6.2 suggests, for three reasons. He did not feel that he had made a major change of subject from his first degree in Insurance; he had been used to living on his own; and he had been a skilled and autonomous learner:

...It [my undergraduate university] values teaching English language, which makes me worry less [about my English]. Moreover, it emphasised training students in communication capability and interpersonal skills... (IQ1, 40)

While Andrew recognised that wide and independent reading were called for by the higher level of study as well as the western pedagogical culture, he struggled to close this gap between Interviews 1 and 2, not managing his time well nor attending tutorials. As a result, in Interview 3 he said: ‘My scores [for individual assignments and exams] were not good, because I didn’t learn in this semester [Semester 2].’ (IQ3, 56). In sharp contrast, his group assignments got very high grades and he appeared to devote more time and effort to group work with western peers:

...in China...because you’re too familiar with group members, it’s alright if you’re a free rider. But here [in the UK], it’s less possible to be a free rider...[because] you’re facing peers from different countries, who you aren’t familiar with. You have to do things. (IQ3, 35)

Similarly, in Interview 1 Andrew was aware that subject-specific discourses could present challenges when reading and writing:

...if it’s Mathematics, he (the teacher) would be satisfied with your correct answers. But in this module (Y) which is quite subjective, it’s really hard to write within a professional perspective. (IQ1, 72)

...writing assignments are absolutely different from writing in exams. You just need to write key points in exams, but the assignment/essay requires you to write as a whole... I think it’s still the language matter. (IQ2, 174)

By Interview 3, however, Andrew’s transitions in language and his difficulties of practising subject-specific literacies were much less evident. To some extent, this

may be due to the role of peer group interactions in aiding his development of expert practitioners' 'ways of thinking and practising' (Hounsell and Anderson, 2005).

### **6.11 Conclusion: MSc FI**

This closing section reviews all seven case studies to highlight some emergent themes.

#### *Comparisons within the MSc FI in terms of transition in language*

For all of these students, the transition in language posed significant challenges, and like their fellow students following the programmes in *Education* and *SPC*, meeting the Programme's language entry requirement was no guarantee of ease of transition.

One area of difficulty for all of the students except Dick was in the use of language to interact with teachers and peers. As Nina noted, the debate-like group discussions which were a core component of teaching and assessment in the Programme were found problematic particularly by the female students. Whilst Lucy and Nina seemed to be able to cope, uncertainty and a lack of confidence held Fiona and Mary back from making progress.

Joining a spontaneously-grouped Chinese community was a coping strategy taken by Fiona, Lucy and Roy to help them to understand the subject knowledge but, as Lucy noticed, this could limit their social interactions with a wider pool of students.

Not surprisingly, then, four students (Fiona, Andrew, Nina and Dick) reported challenges in reading and listening in the subject-situated vocabulary and discourses, irrespective (in the case of the first three) of whether they had gained relevant subject knowledge in their first degree. This could lead to difficulties in critical thinking and deep learning. However, all of the participants in this Programme continued to experience writing difficulties across the three interviews. As was also the case for the *SPC* students, these difficulties could be exacerbated by the limited time set for

exam questions, although for some (Lucy, Dick and Roy) statistical questions proved easier to answer than essay-type questions. Indeed, coping strategies were found more frequently in *FI* than in the other two programmes, and included attributing time and effort strategically in exams (Lucy and Fiona), selective reading (Lucy and Dick) and summarizing and memorizing (Lucy and Nina). Generally speaking, exams were thought to be less rewarding than group assignments, although some students were sceptical about what was expected in such assignments (Lucy, Fiona and Dick).

#### *Comparison within the MSc FI in terms of transition in level of study*

Reviewing the cases suggests that whether students' transition in level of study progressed or regressed was related to how they conceived of learning and the 'terms of engagement' required by the Programme. Whether the students took an appropriately reflective approach to self-regulate their learning was also a factor. Moreover, how well students were able to recognise what was expected of them was also relevant and was related to their difficulties in closing the gap.

Although most of students reported challenges when doing critical thinking, none of them related this specifically to the higher level of knowledge associated with Master's programmes. Some (Lucy and Fiona) felt unprepared for critical thinking while others did not (Dick, Roy and Nina), although language difficulties generally added to the challenge of thinking critically.

#### *Comparisons within the MSc FI in terms of transition in subject*

None of the research participants, irrespective of whether they had changed subject, reported that the Master's knowledge component of the Master's programme was in itself challenging. For Dick, who had changed subjects, there were challenges not only caused by recognising subject-specific vocabulary in English, but also with what that vocabulary meant within the discipline concerned in some modules (although it

should be added that this was a challenge that most of the students had experienced to some degree or other).

#### *Comparison within the MSc FI in terms of transition in pedagogical culture*

Interactive engagement and critical thinking stood out for these students as the key features of the UK pedagogical culture as represented in this Master's programme, although, as noted earlier in this section of the chapter, the challenges posed were interwoven with other transitions in language and level of study.

It proved difficult to anticipate how the students would respond to the UK pedagogies, regardless of their prior experience of western pedagogy culture or their previous experience in a similar disciplinary community. In fact, five of the students reported no major difficulties or overcame the challenges. Ironically, it was the two students who had prior experience of western pedagogy (Fiona and Mary) who struggled to cope. From the researcher's perspective, this may be related to their patchy confidence. Because they were confident of succeeding on the Programme, they appeared to be 'blind' to what the pedagogical culture of the Master's programme called for. Thus, their learning was held back with the consequence of weakening their confidence and in turn their willingness to engage. This became a vicious circle for them.

#### *Comparisons within the MSc FI in terms of living and learning overseas*

Three out of the four female students (the exception was Nina) found living and learning in the UK challenging in various respects regardless of whether or not they had lived away from home before. The male students reported no such difficulties.



### Discussion and Implications

#### **7.1 Introduction**

This thesis has reported on an investigation into the transitions that Chinese Master's students from three different Programmes experienced in their journeys from undergraduate degrees in China to postgraduate Master's degrees in the UK, and has highlighted the key challenges these students faced during their individual journeys. It has been noted in Chapter 2, the **Literature Review**, that previous studies have researched student transitions and identified five important transitions that have had an impact on students' success at Master's level: transitions in language, subject, level of study, pedagogical culture and learning and living abroad. This is not to suggest that each transition has received the same level of attention in previous literature: as the current research indicates, level of study and language emerged as key transitions which influenced student success. However, findings from this current research suggest that four key dimensions of transition – language, level of study, pedagogical culture and subject – impacted to varying degrees on students as they progressed on their Master's journeys. In addition, living and studying abroad, and students' individual characteristics, were seen to have a significant impact on their success and on how they perceived themselves as learners as they negotiated their transactions with teachers and peers.

This is not to suggest that these transitions impacted on each student's journey to the same degree, nor that the challenges encountered during each transition were experienced as separate and distinct; rather, as can be seen from the Findings chapters which report in some detail eighteen contrasting student journeys, the transitions were closely interwoven with some being more significant to some student than to others. However, all students reported that they experienced the language transition as particularly challenging, especially at the initial stages of their degrees, and although listening and talking were identified as problematic in earlier

interviews, in subsequent reports reading and writing had clearly become more of an issue for them. It was also evident that these challenges with language were centrally implicated in the difficulties the students encountered with the other transitions.

Fine-grained analysis of the participants' transcripts revealed that to be successful when studying at Master's level students had not only successfully to navigate these transitions, they also had to acquire and demonstrate skills as autonomous learners and be able to regulate their own learning; be able to be analytical and engage in critical thinking; interact appropriately with teachers and peers; and acquire and demonstrate mastery of the specific subject discourses required for the Programme. For many of these students such skills were not required at all, or to the same degree, during their undergraduate study in China and therefore proved to be particularly challenging for them as their Master's degrees progressed and the demands made on them increased.

This chapter will review the findings on these transitions and the kinds of challenges they represented for students within and across programmes, as well as their impact on student success. It will also examine the importance of understanding transitions by the learning journeys of individual students, each of whom faced a distinctive set of transitional challenges.

The second, and the most important, part of the chapter reviews the findings from the integrating perspective of Masters' Literacies. It focuses on what is required for successful study at this level, as brought into sharp focus by the experiences of these international students. Four key components of Masters' Literacies are highlighted: autonomy in learning, subject discourses, critical and analytical thinking, and interaction with teachers and peers.

Finally, the implications of the study – conceptual, methodological, and practical – will be explored in a discussion of our understanding of these students' experiences in terms of their journeys towards Masters' literacies.

## **7.2 Findings on Transitions**

Rather than revisiting each finding, only key findings will be summarised here to examine Chinese Master's students' learning journeys in two main respects. In the first, their transitional journeys in a general sense will be depicted when reviewing challenges commonly found in each dimension of their transition. In the second, their individual journeys will be examined. These were distinctive and unique, and were impacted on by these students' individual characteristics/attributes. Therefore, the impact of students' individual differences on their transitions will be addressed when revisiting how they coped with common challenges.

This discussion has two structural functions. First, this section links to preceding chapters by highlighting findings which emerged from the findings chapters to answer/explain the research questions. However, in light of the complexity and interwoven nature of the findings, the research questions will be addressed and re-/visited at different places in this Discussion chapter.

Second, this section provides the background for the subsequent section, which is the main contribution of this study. Therefore, when reviewing each transition, the impact of individual characteristics on students' journeys will be foregrounded.

### **7.2.1 Students' transitions and challenges: commonly and generally**

#### **7.2.1.1 Transition in subject**

Among all interviewees, while the majority of Chinese students in the *Education* programme had a major change in subject, this was not the case for *SPC* students. However, all students were found to encounter and experience challenges with these transitions in subject, even though some of them claimed that they did not change subjects and/or their two subjects were closely related. Therefore, it can be argued that the curriculum content taught in similar subject areas is not universally the same

across countries and across institutions. Hence, although the students may have taken a similar subject as their first degree in China, the curriculum content may have been different from their second degree subject in the UK.

There is a difficulty of separating the analysis of the subject transition out from other factors, like level of study, pedagogical culture and more particularly the most influential effect of language.

Firstly, the effect of level of study (with respect to the higher level of knowledge) was more significant to the *SPC* students, even though some of these students had a slight change of subject. However, for some *Education* and *FI* students who had a considerable subject change, this effect was not demonstrated as of equal importance. Yet, for the *Education* students who changed subjects considerably, learning how to learn in a western pedagogical culture was much more challenging. Nevertheless, the factor of language was no doubt of greatest importance to all students, irrespective of their programmes. This as a key contribution of the current study, will be explored in the section **7.3 Journeying towards Masters' Literacies in a UK university: an attempt at a synthesis.**

Based on the preceding review, the two classification schemes emphasised in **Chapter 2 Literature Review** are extremely significant in relation to the research question (iii) 'How are the students' Master's learning journeys affected by features of the three specific Master's programmes investigated?'

#### *7.2.1.2 Transition in language*

All students encountered challenges in the language transition. In contrast to what Brown and Holloway (2008) have reported, there was no indication that its impact on students' stress was any more significant in the initial rather than later stages of learning. Findings revealed that, as students progressed through their learning journeys, the impact of the English barrier increased because the modes of English students were required to use was no longer limited to their everyday classroom practices (for example, *listening* to teachers' lectures and *speaking* to communicate

with peers and teachers). Increased difficulties with language surfaced because additional modes of English were introduced when assessments and dissertations were assigned (for example, *reading* academic books and journal articles to prepare for *writing*).

Listening, reading, speaking and writing were each found to be challenging, but their relative importance varied from one programme to another. For example, in *SPC* listening was important, because one of the teaching methods was by remote video. In the *Education* programme, writing was significant because students' writing practices were necessary to fulfill the requirements of the subject their Programme was concerned with. *FI* students were not only struggling to write academically but also to speak well and effectively in group discussions.

Although these students' competence in English proved helpful to them, this helpfulness appeared to be limited. This is because students faced not only an English language barrier but also other language-related challenges. When coping with the language barrier, difficulties increased, because this was interwoven with factors, including western pedagogies, and most importantly of all, subject discourses (which will be explored more fully in section **7.3 Journeying towards Masters' Literacies in a UK university: an attempt at a synthesis**).

#### *7.2.1.3 Transition in level of study*

Students' transitions in level of study were demonstrated to be important to all participants. This was because it was proved to be pervasive within students' other dimensions of transitions in three aspects:

##### The Master's-level of knowledge

Firstly, as is demonstrated in the findings, some of the students struggled with this dimension of transition. This is because they found that there was an undergraduate-postgraduate gap in knowledge. However, this knowledge gap has not been emphasised in other studies in the **Review of Literature** as one of the

distinctive challenges with Master's learning. Not only did the current study find that the knowledge gap between undergraduate and postgraduate study was a significant feature; it was also noted that the gap was particularly evident in students who embarked on a hard discipline (*SPC*).

### Independent learning as a Master's student

Whereas the findings of the current research concurred with those of previous studies discussed in the **Literature Review** – that the ability of Master's students to take increased responsibility for their own learning and become autonomous learners is essential for success at Master's level study – the situation was revealed to be considerably more complex as it became evident from participants' reports that language, pedagogical culture, subject matter and living and learning abroad had a significant impact on their ability to become independent learners.

There were also differences between programmes. This is because it became clear from these findings that each of these programmes and the subjects associated with them had its own distinctive 'signature pedagogy' (Shulman, 2005):

What I mean by 'signature pedagogy' is a mode of teaching that has become inextricably identified with preparing people for a particular profession. (p.9)

The first aspect of 'signature pedagogy' to emerge in the current research is that each Programme associated with its own subject area has unique 'pedagogies of engagement' (Shulman, 2005, p. 13). Because, compared to *Education*, both *FI* and *SPC* introduced more weekly quizzes and tutorial questions/assignments from the early stages of the Programmes, the students engaged in these two Programmes were more likely to engage themselves in everyday learning. Moreover, because these students were able to check all students' scores of their weekly exercises on WebCT, their self-confidence and sense of learner responsibility could be fostered and enhanced through reading their scores in comparisons to those of their peers.

Consequently, whereas assuming sufficient learner autonomy was less important in *FI* and *SPC* programmes, it was extremely important and more challenging to *Education* students.

### Expectations for critical thinking at Master's level

With regard to a second aspect of transition in level of study, it was not surprising to find that, as with independence in learning, critical thinking was an extremely important expectation in relation to Master's level study. This requirement was significantly pervasive in the learning activities (for example autonomous reading and classroom activities) of these students, so it became a formidable challenge for these students to become appropriately skilled as critical thinkers. There were also programme differences: it was more highly emphasised and crucial in the *Education* programme than in the other targeted programmes – *SPC* and *FI* – which were relatively harder disciplines. We shall return to the vital issue of critical thinking in section 7.3, where it is explored as a key aspect of Masters' Literacies.

As the findings also suggested, student transitions in level of study were interwoven with other factors, such as the western pedagogical culture (transition in pedagogical culture) and students' language barrier (transition in language).

#### *7.2.1.4 Transitions in pedagogical culture*

Not surprisingly, differences in signature pedagogies influenced the nature of students' transitions in pedagogical culture and the challenges they encountered. Thus, for example, students in *FI* and *Education* faced challenges and expectations of critical thinking in these softer subjects and across teaching-learning activities/situations. This is because, to form the 'habits of hearts' (Shulman, 2005, p.14) associated with their future professions, the students in the *FI* programme and especially those in the *Education* programme were expected to develop criticality more than students in hard disciplines.

### Learning from interaction

The third aspect of signature pedagogies of relevance to this study was the extent to which the students were expected to work together in groups and collaborative tasks. This, as Shulman explained, is about the pervasiveness of a pedagogy, which 'cuts

across institutions and not only courses' (2005, p.9). Therefore, these applied particularly to the programmes in 'softer' subjects (like *Education* and *FI*): for the *Education* students their lack of familiarity with peer learning was exacerbated by their unfamiliarity prior to embarking on the Programme, with *Education* subject area. For the *FI* students, on the other hand, the subject area was a much more familiar one but learning through interaction with their peers was nevertheless a significant source of difficulty for some students.

#### *7.2.1.5 Transition in living and learning abroad*

This dimension of transition was found to be of particular importance to the *Education* and the *FI* students. The present study illuminates an important gap in current understanding of Master's student transitions, notably the interwoven relationship between students' academic developments and their experiences of social living. This was especially apparent amongst the *FI* and *Education* students, where the more the students were ready to accept becoming marginalised in their academic work, the more likely this was to occur in their social life. More negative feelings (such as stress, loneliness, loss of self-confidence) tended to follow. Similarly, where students had little informal interaction with western peers and UK teachers, this also had a limiting effect on their facility in everyday English.

A complicating factor was Programme differences. For instance, none of the *SPC* students' academic transitions were influenced by their experiences of social life. Moreover, whilst some *Education* students tended to marginalise themselves from both their western peers and Chinese peers, *FI* students liked communicating with their Chinese peers but they tended to marginalise themselves from the non-Chinese group.



### *7.2.2 Students' transitions as individual journeys*

When external effects have been discussed in the preceding review section, the concern has been chiefly with differences and similarities across the three programmes. However, differences were also found between students engaged in the same programme: while some participants appeared to be able to progress transitions well by finding coping strategies early and practising them more effectively, other students' transitions seemed to be stuck or even appeared to drop in a downward spiral. This finding is noteworthy because internal effects (for example, students' individual characteristics) need to be taken into account in conjunction with external ones. Although students' motivations to learn have been discussed in the **Literature Review** and identified as meriting consideration in the current research, the case-by-case review of findings on students' learning journeys has indicated that the most illuminating motivational aspect has been that of students' self-confidence, especially with respect to their literacy practices, and in relationship to their backgrounds before coming to the UK.

#### *7.2.2.1 Self-confidence related to students' Master's studies*

At the initial stage of their Master's journeys, all of the students – even those who seemed at a disadvantage compared to their peers – had strong confidence in themselves and were optimistic about their future Master's learning. However, once they had begun speaking English to their western peers, the Chinese students' confidence was quickly undermined by the gap they saw between their English competence and that of their western peers. It was soon brought home to them how fast the western students learnt new materials (by reading academic articles and listening to the class) and completed writing assignments.

Between this initial stage of 'language shock' and midway through their respective programmes (Interview 2), most of the participants began comparing their learning achievements to their Chinese peers rather than to their western counterparts.

Later, when these students were closer to completing their Master's learning, they were more likely to compare 'the new self' they had become to 'the old self' at the initial stage of their learning journeys. This comparison resulted in a match/mis-match between students' expected outcomes at the initial stage of Master's learning and the actual outcome at the end. This match/mis-match will be revisited subsequently.

#### *7.2.2.2 Self-confidence related to the academic settings*

In every programme, there were some participants – particularly those who had been involved in the western (pedagogical) culture before coming to the UK – who found it comfortable to learn in a western academic setting. These academic settings were more likely to be related to group tasks and communicative activities (for example, communications with peers and teachers, and group assignments). It is intriguing to note that these students were less likely to make active contributions in these settings and were more likely to become 'free riders' (and thus to regress in their transition with respect to pedagogical culture). By contrast, some other students encountering for the first time this unfamiliar teaching-learning environment felt discomfort at contributing less in these activities. They were therefore more likely to thrive as learners in the western pedagogical culture.

#### *7.2.2.3 The impact of students' backgrounds on their self-confidence in their learning journeys*

It has already been noted that being a high-achieving undergraduate learner or an outstanding English speaker in China was not a guarantee of success in UK learning. Moreover, the findings also indicated that the more self-confident the students were at the initial stage of the programmes, the greater the expectation they would have of their future achievements at the end of their learning. Ironically, some students who had gained strong self-confidence from their previous learning and/or working experiences in China were more likely to over-estimate their actual abilities and to under-estimate their Chinese peers and the difficulties of their Master's learning. Similarly, although these over-confident students could appear to have a good grasp

of what was expected of them in the new academic setting, their understanding of the actual requirements proved in due course to be limited and narrow. This surface-level comprehension was more likely to mislead them into using less appropriate and effective coping strategies.

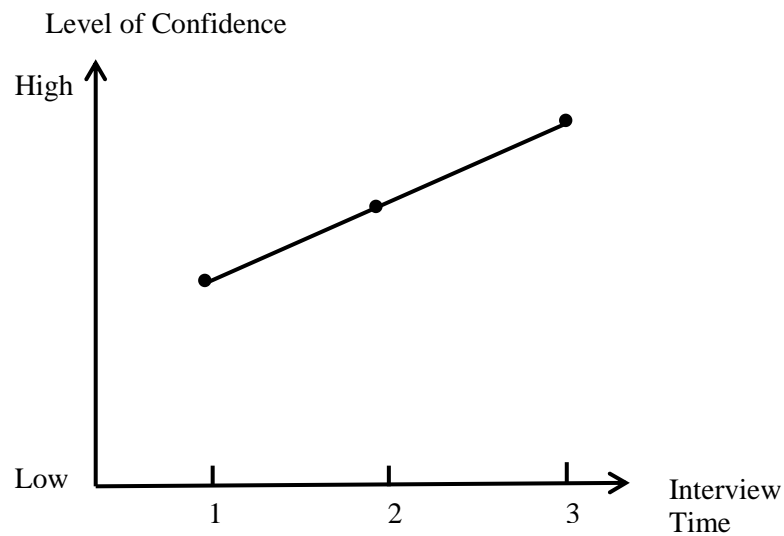
When faced with evidence that their coping strategies had not had the hoped-for effect, students reacted in varying ways. Students who had adequate (but not excessive) self-confidence tended to be persistent in seeking other, more effective coping strategies, while over-confident students were more likely to be frustrated and attribute their failures to others. These latter students' transitions went rapidly into a downward spiral from which it was difficult for their self-confidence to recover.

#### *7.2.2.4 Students' self-confidence as a prerequisite for a successful Master's journey*

Apart from Lillian, who was observed to maintain a relatively stable level of self-confidence throughout her Master's journey, the ebbs and flows of the students' self-confidence in spotting and addressing challenges are shown in Figures 7.1 to 7.6. Representing the students' experiences in this form may help to explain an intriguing and perhaps surprising finding: why some students were predicted to cope with challenges well, but actually did not. Conversely, it may help to explain why some of their peers succeeded in their learning with a growing confidence. A moderate but adequate degree of self-confidence, it would appear, encouraged students to attribute the source of challenges intrinsically – which, in turn, equipped them better to cope with frustrations and challenges in their learning, because they were able to see difficulties as controllable and manageable. By contrast, the learning experience for some students with inadequate levels of confidence was more likely to take an opposite path and end in regression.

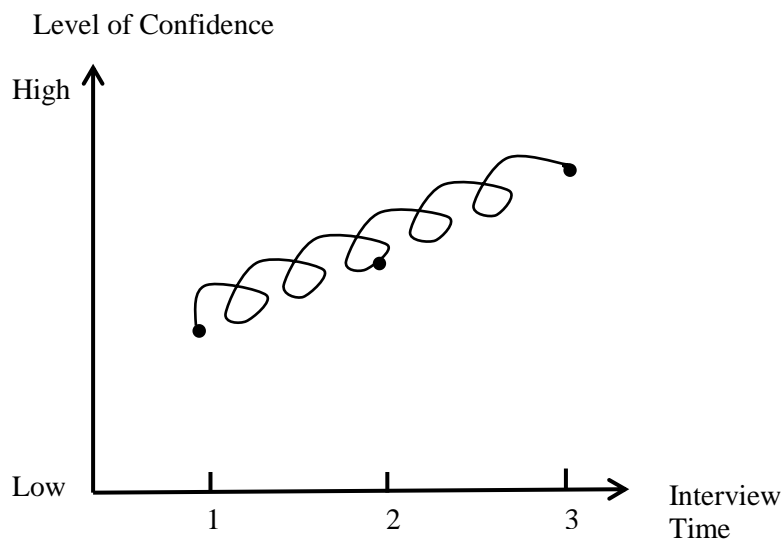
Figure 7.1 outlines a steadily growing pattern of confidence for seven participants in the *Education* (Sherry), *SPC* (Charles, Mike and Emily), and *FI* (Lucy, Roy and Nina) programmes. As their cases demonstrate, when encountering challenges, these

informants managed their affective feelings, maintained a stable level of self-confidence, and devoted time and effort to finding effective coping strategies.



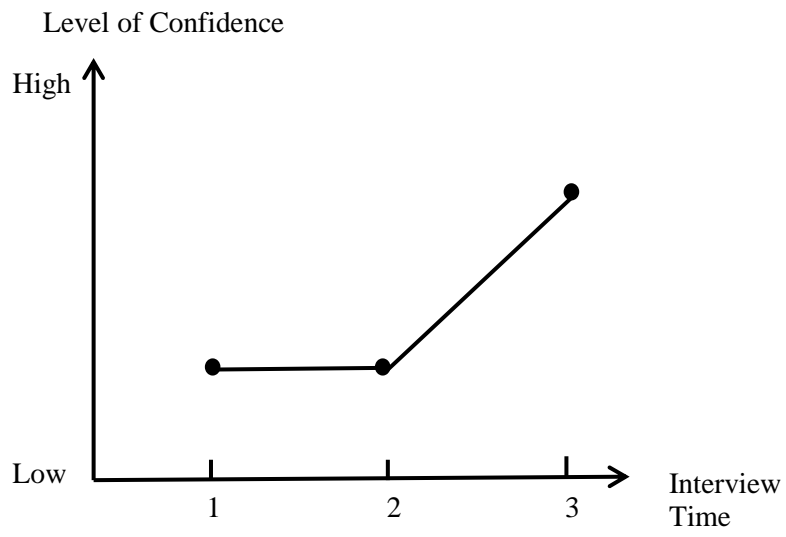
**Figure 7.1 Steadily growing confidence**

Figure 7.2 depicts one *FI* student's (Dick) self-confidence trajectory. When his learning disadvantages challenged him, his self-confidence declined. However, being able to find effective coping strategies promptly enabled his self-confidence to leap up again. Eventually, his self-confidence grew as his academic literacies developed, and he graduated successfully.

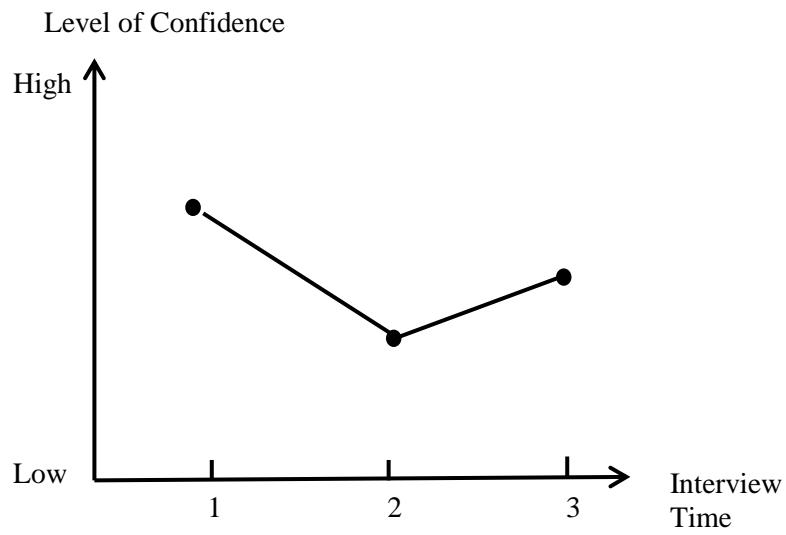


**Figure 7.2 Fluctuating but growing confidence**

Figures 7.3 and 7.4 respectively portray the trajectories of self-confidence of an *Education* student (Cindy) and a *FI* student (Andrew). Although both experienced an initial plateau in self-confidence, it eventually recovered. This is because at the beginning of their programmes, whilst Cindy was over-stressed, Dick was over-confident. Nevertheless, the quicker they began gaining adequate confidence, the sooner they started progressing.

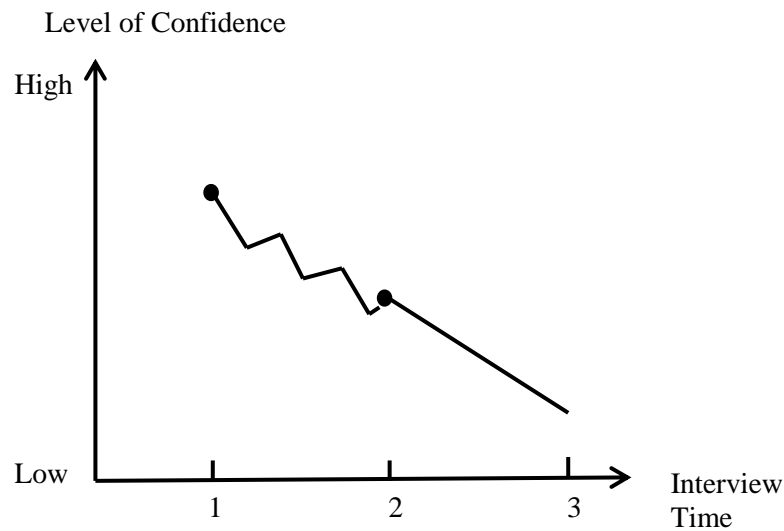


**Figure 7.3 Plateaued and then growing confidence**



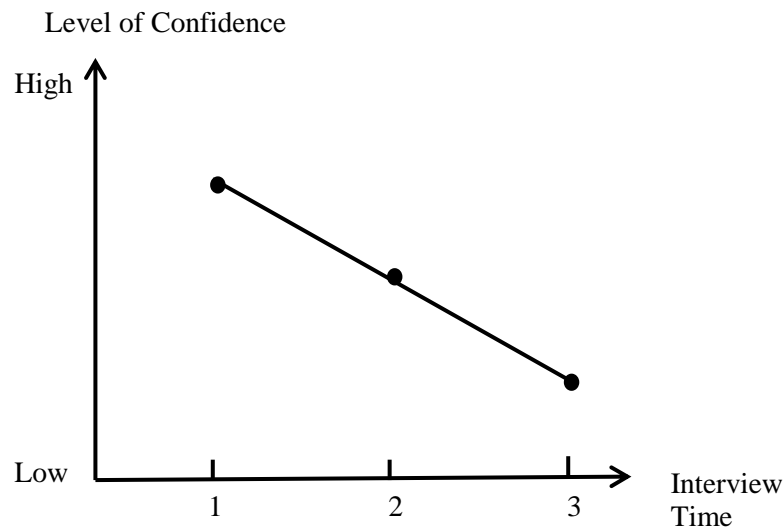
**Figure 7.4 Falling but recovering confidence**

Figures 7.5 and 7.6 illustrate cases of students whose self-confidence did not recover. Figure 7.5 shows how the self-confidence of two students (Zack on the *Education* and Dani on the *SPC* programme) dropped, even though they had strong confidence at the beginning of their learning journeys. The combination of strong initial confidence and growing uncertainty about how to cope with difficulties encountered not only held back their learning but also undermined their self-confidence.



**Figure 7.5 Initial confidence decreasing in a downward spiral**

Figure 7.6 describes five participants' decrease of confidence. Apart from Bruce (a *SPC* student), all participants in this final group were over-confident at the start of their programmes (Fiona and Mary, both on the *FI* programme; Rita and Tracy, both on the *Education* programme). Therefore to maintain self-esteem but also to self-defend, all of them attributed the reason for their failure to extrinsic sources, which resulted in their regression both in terms of their learning experience and their self-confidence. Bruce, whose obvious learning disadvantages contributed to his low confidence in his ability to succeed, unsurprisingly lost his self-confidence and failed the Programme.



**Figure 7.6 Decreasing confidence and unable to recover**

### ***7.3 Journeying towards Masters' Literacies in a UK university: an attempt at a synthesis***

As the **Literature Review** chapter made clear, the work of academic literacies researchers such as Lea and Street (1998) and Lillis (2001) offers a fruitful perspective from which to make sense of the findings of the present study, particularly by viewing learning in higher education as a fundamentally social activity within which notions of power relationships, learner identity and subject discourse communities are of considerable importance. From that perspective, the UK learning journeys of the Chinese students forming the focus of the present study can be seen not simply in terms of 'study skills deficits' to be remedied, nor merely as instances of academic socialisation. Rather, the students were undergoing evolution in their academic literacies which entailed a re-construction of their identities and new ways of living and being, and the Master's programmes in which



they participated are to be regarded not just as course-specific but also as disciplinary sites of discourses and power.

As a consequence, the learning transitions experienced by these Chinese Master's students' can be perceived, in the current research, as identity transformations from being undergraduate students in China to becoming Master's students in the UK. Facing an unfamiliar environment disabled these Chinese students, casting them in the role of a minority group who were expected to socialise into the mainstream UK group. This environmental change exposed gaps between the capabilities they had acquired from their earlier experiences in China and the capabilities they needed to do well in their current experiences in a UK postgraduate environment. As elaborated in the **Literature Review**, narrowing these gaps involved transitions along four inter-related dimensions:

- *Level of study*: closing the gap between teachers' requirements and the students' literacy capabilities as they moved from undergraduate to postgraduate Master's-level learning;
- *Pedagogical culture*: closing the gap between the appropriate kind of learning-teaching literacies practised in the academic discourse community in China and those required in UK universities;
- *Discipline*: the gap between the literacy practices of relative novices within a given discipline or subject area and those of more expert scholars and academics;
- *Language*: the gap between the degree of fluency in the English language needed to participate in academic discourses in their respective Master's programmes and the general English required in everyday life.

While these predicted gaps indeed helped to direct the design of the current research and were demonstrated as significant in the **Findings** chapters, what has also emerged clearly from the analyses is a markedly more complex picture which could not fully be captured by proceeding from the 'gaps' alone. They were therefore regrouped into four new categories: autonomy in learning; subject discourses; analytical and critical thinking; and interaction with peers and teachers. These new

categories can be viewed as four key components of Masters' Literacies. They differentiate the concept of 'Masters' Literacies' from the well-established 'academic literacy practices' in two aspects. Firstly, the new concept helps to highlight the uniqueness of Master's-level learning and differentiate it from more general discussions of higher education learning which, as we saw in the **Literature Review** chapter, have tended to focus wholly or mainly on the undergraduate level. Secondly, the new concept foregrounds the transitional nature of these Chinese students' learning journeys as they engaged with what was expected of them in their respective Master's programmes. Accordingly, a focus on 'Masters' Literacies' and its key features may help future Chinese Master's students to be better prepared before coming to the UK, and it may have a role to play in promoting greater collaboration and interchange between UK postgraduate teachers and their Chinese students to achieve fuller congruence of each other's academic expectations and perceptions.

### *7.3.1 Four key components of Masters' Literacies*

#### *7.3.1.1 Autonomy in learning*

##### Autonomy in learning as indispensable to Master's-level study

The key role of autonomy in Master's level learning is widely recognised. It is a general requirement of all Master's students, as the University of Edinburgh's guidelines state (2013): 'Postgraduate students are expected to be proactive and self-directed in all aspects of study; to make independent use of library and all other available resources; to embrace e-learning opportunities; to make full use of laboratory facilities; and to take the initiative in their use of information sources.' (A Code of Practice for Taught Postgraduate Programmes, p.6). Similar statements can be found in other documentation relevant to at least two of the three Master's programmes surveyed, such as the Subject Benchmark Statements of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), specifying the qualities expected of Master's graduates:

...critical self-awareness, self-reflection and self-management; time management;

sensitivity to diversity in people and different situations and the ability to continue to learn through reflection on practice and experience. (Business and Management, QAA Subject Benchmark Statement, 2007, p.6)

...an enhanced capability for independent learning and work... [This programme expects] graduating MEng students to have greater capacities for independent action, accepting responsibilities, formulating ideas proactively, dealing with open-ended and unfamiliar problems, planning and developing strategies, implementing and executing agreed plans, leading and managing teams where required, evaluating achievement against specification and plan, and decision-making. (QAA Subject Benchmark Statement, Engineering, 2010, p.8)

### Autonomy in learning as an individual practice of re-construction

Although learning autonomy as a concept has been well-defined by different researchers, Littlewood's definition seems to be of particular importance to the current research because it emphasises two facets:

...an autonomous person as one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions. This capacity depends on two main components: *ability* and *willingness*... (Littlewood, 1996, p.428)

This definition links to a common phenomenon found in the findings: the vast majority of interviewees were unable to close the gap between coming to recognise what was expected of them in their programmes and being able to take appropriate action to close this gap.

As suggested in the **Literature Review**, some researchers have argued that Chinese students do not lack the abilities necessary for high academic achievement in the West; instead, their prior education in China may not have prepared them well for the new environment in which their Master's learning will be carried out (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997). The present research indeed seems to confirm that the Chinese pedagogical culture constrained some participants' potentiality to exercise skills in student-regulation of learning (which will be more fully explored in the next sub-section below). Nevertheless, an equally crucial contributing factor was found – how students subjectively conceive of learning. From this standpoint, learning autonomy is not just a function of prior educational experiences but also, in the hands

of the individual learners, is an aspect of their internal control. To some extent at least, autonomy in learning is thus an individual's re-construction.

#### a) Conceptions of learning

Although it originally grew out of research into western learners, especially at the undergraduate level, Marton and Säljö's hierarchy of conceptions of learning (2005) has also proved to be valid in the current investigation. It helped to illuminate what these Chinese informants understood by learning at university and what they thought high-quality learning entailed, and it suggested that generally speaking (and despite the fact that they had completed and/or succeeded in their first degree education in China) their conceptions of learning had not progressed to the level that Master's education in the UK called for, namely viewing learning as a transforming rather than reproducing process.

This conceptual transformation is important to western students who transit from school learning to undergraduate learning domestically, but as a function of Master's learning as well as a key element of learning under the western pedagogical culture, it becomes indispensable for the participants in the current research if they are to make progress in their identity transformation from a less powerful novice student to an empowered disciplinary expert.

#### b) Autonomy and student-regulation of learning

Another potential hindrance for these students in becoming appropriately autonomous learners was that of gaps in their knowledge base, which could constrain their awareness of what they should learn and why, when entering into an unfamiliar community. This is important to note because the literature on self-regulation of learning (e.g. Vermunt & Verloop, 1999; Zimmerman, 2002) has tended to focus on students' external performances of utilising skills, rather than on the internal knowledge base enabling them to recognise their learning needs and learning goals and the associated advantages and disadvantages. In the case of these students, all of whom had been educated to first-degree level in China, pursuing a Master's programme in the UK meant entering a new disciplinary community as well as a

western discourse community, and their self-regulatory activities were found to be related to the new subject matter as well as the western pedagogical culture. In other words, as suggested in the **Findings** chapters, students would be more likely to select adequate skills to self-regulate their learning only if they gained appropriate understandings to set realistic learning goals in terms of re-constructing knowledge as well as being an expert in a given discourse community. Similarly, inappropriate self-recognitions and uncertainties regarding requirements of the new learning environment would be less likely to lead students to become autonomous learners. Indeed, uncertainty and ambivalence could mislead students into selecting and exercising ineffective (or at least, much less effective) skills to self-regulate their learning.

A further interesting difference in emphasis from the self-regulation literature is in relation to the processes of adaptation, whether in terms of ‘*orienting* learning goals by *planning* a learning process with considerations of characteristics of the learning task itself as well as the learning situation and time constraints’ (Vermunt and Verloop, 1999) or ‘setting specific proximal goals for oneself’ and ‘adopting powerful strategies for attaining these goals’ (Zimmerman, 2002). For these researchers, adjusting to a new learning environment is seen as an opening stage in a more settled process of self-regulation, whereas in the findings of the present study, Master’s learning journeys to these participants were more likely never-ending journeys in search of more effective methods, rather than initial (and temporary) stage of adaptation. In line with Lillis and Turner’s findings (2001), some participants were bewildered by the requirements of good assignments and good learners in their UK teachers’ eyes. Hence, they sometimes planned and exercised new coping strategies that proved not to correspond effectively with the requirements of their programmes. Furthermore, learning goals which underpinned learning tasks, assessment methods and academic literacy requirements were set differently at different stages of a Master’s programme, and consequently participants frequently encountered new challenges and found that their old coping strategies were not so effective in the new situation. Under the time pressures of a Master’s programme, participants became tired both physically and psychologically. Accordingly, by the

end of the three interviews, no students in the current research became pure autonomous learners who had completely overcome all learning difficulties and stresses. Those who did adapt better were more likely to attribute lower-than-expected results to controllable factors (such as that they did not do enough autonomous reading), rather than blaming others for what they saw as un-controllable factors (for instance, teachers did not assign sufficient reading), and as a consequence were better able to self-motivate to make further changes in their study behaviour.

### Autonomy in learning as a social practice of re-construction

Autonomous learning is not a private literacy practice, nor an innate talent. It is fostered through social interaction (Little, 1995), and learning can be scaffolded by more knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Borrowing academic literacies researchers' notions of power and identity, this scaffolding process can also be perceived as a transformation from an identity of novice in an unfamiliar community to two more developed identities – a disciplinary expert as well as a qualified professional in future work. However, in the present study, the impact of the social environment on the development of students' autonomy was found to differ from one Master's programme to another.

In the case of the *Education* students, their knowledge expansion only developed slightly and their self-motivation was hardly promoted at all through learning socially with other peers. The academic literacy practices of the *Education* students were more like private activities, rather than a project conducted collaboratively. Consequently, when some *Education* students found it hard to learn from each other, their self-motivation and learning autonomy decreased.

By contrast, the social context had a substantial influence on the *FI* students. It meant more than just acquisition of the subject matter. Their learning was well scaffolded, for example, in terms of the subject knowledge and the rigour of disciplinary literacies and even course-specific literacies.

It is worthwhile to recall, as suggested in **Chapter 6**, that compared to participants in the two other programmes, social knowledge and practices (for instance, interpersonal relationships and communication) mattered considerably to the *FI* students in terms of their future success in their chosen profession. Hence, autonomous learning in a social setting enabled the *FI* participants to recognise how to think and practise like a qualified disciplinary expert, and talking with ‘more experienced businessmen’ – alternatively in Vygotsky’s term, more knowledgeable peers (1978) – offered some profession-related insights which textbooks did not necessarily give (for instance how to effectively communicate with work colleagues and more significantly how to independently interact with clients from different backgrounds in a culturally appropriate way).

In addition, learning as a social activity was shown to enhance participants’ self-reflection and self-awareness through comparing their performances to others; and learning with peers helped these students to find coping strategies quickly and try out new types of social behaviour.

Apart from the *Education* students, the Chinese participants were found more willing to learn collectively in a group. When learning with others, their self-motivation and self-confidence were enhanced and it helped them to become more autonomous learners who were able to deal with their emotions. Nevertheless, echoing the previous literature, these research participants, especially the *FI* students, were more engaged in social activities within their own cultural network rather than in multi-cultural activities.

To sum up, successfully transforming to a new identity that is better adapted to the new discourse community does not only require students to regulate their learning intellectually and practically; self-regulation also seems to play an important role in keeping students motivated and proactive at every stage of their learning journeys. Employing autonomy in learning is a pre-requisite to choosing in what ways to re-construct knowledge when practising subject discourses, analytical and critical thinking, and interacting with teachers and peers.

### 7.3.1.2 Subject discourses

#### Shifting modes of discourse and communicating subject knowledge

Given that Chinese Master's students are learners of the subject matter as well as of language, they are required to become active language users to negotiate different discourse power relationships purposefully in different contexts of literacy practices. The evidence from this study indicates that discourse modes (listening, reading, speaking and writing) were inter-related, as was apparent when participants were faced with two basic needs – receiving meaning messages about disciplinary vocabularies and discourses in the English text, communicating in written form their own understandings and interpretations of subject knowledge.

Trying to link their existing knowledge about subject discourses (in Chinese text) in seeking to understand the new discourses (in English text) was a strategy used by all participants as their spontaneous response to confusions arising in the new subject discourses (for example, not understanding what their teacher said and what they read from academic articles). Whilst some participants chose to read a relevant Chinese text before reading the English texts as a coping strategy, sometimes that could end in failure and lead to more rather than less confusion. However, how problematic this could be differed from one discipline to another due to the subject matter. Compared to the *SPC* students, for example, students of softer subjects (*FI* and particularly *Education*) found it more challenging to process subject vocabularies and discourses. Accordingly, this could hold them back subsequently in expressing themselves in the subject in verbal form (for instance, speaking to peers/teachers and writing academic assignments). Although *SPC* students could also find this challenging, they found it easier to cope because, in their discipline, visualisations of subject matter were much more common, for example representations in the form of figures, diagrams and formulae.

A similarly effective coping strategy was hard to find in the soft disciplines because, whereas the students of hard disciplines were more likely to deal with factual meanings, the students of softer disciplines had to transmit creative/subjective



meanings explicitly and logically in a discipline-specific way, and were more likely to have to voice their own opinions.

The present study also suggests that the difficulties of practising this shift (from personal subjectivity to disciplinary subjectivity and making meaning open to peers' critical examination) varied from one mode of literacies (speaking activities) to another (writing activities). For instance, practising this shift in speaking mode would offer a preliminary occasion to help students to be better ready to practise this shift in subsequent writing activities. Participants could learn from vocalising their own thoughts and self-reflect whether their argumentation in subject discourses was in accordance with disciplinary norms, and their self-reflection could be scaffolded by audiences.

Practising this shift in writing was more difficult and became more significant to students' identity transformation in the process of becoming a disciplinary expert as well as changing from a monolingual to a bilingual speaker. Reviewing the previous studies (McCune and Hounsell, 2005; Norton, 2000) as well as the current research suggests that academic writing conventions represent a particular social practice which, compared to speaking, is more formal, complicated and demanding in terms of students' identity re-construction. Indeed, while communicating knowledge was a common difficulty from the beginning of the Master's year onwards, it was the challenges of writing that remained significant even in the third of the interviews (and presumably beyond). The findings suggested that students' frustration and stress increased as they encountered further writing difficulties in the dissertation component. Although students' experiences at the dissertation stage were not addressed and targeted in the present study, it may be good to flag this up as a fertile area for future research, given the considerable demands the dissertation seems to make on students' writing expertise. It should also be noted that these findings contradict those of Brown and Holloway (2008) – for example, that students' psychological stress regarding discipline-specific language comes at the beginning of their journeys and diminishes afterwards – while on the other hand lending confirmation to Carroll and Ryan's argument (2005) that one-year Master's

programmes give students insufficient time to acquire a firm grasp of academic English.

### Shifting subject discourses in relation to the impacts of socio-cultures/ pedagogical culture

The findings chapters showed that changing subject from undergraduate to Master's degree was easier in a soft discipline like *Education* than relatively harder ones like *FI* and *SPC*). Interestingly, however, students of softer disciplines suffered more frustrations and difficulties when closing the gap between the experts' literacy practices and novices' literacy practices within their new subject. This was not simply because of a lack of prior content knowledge, nor that in a soft discipline like *Education* there were more stringent requirements for critical awareness and the use of textual discourses. More importantly, they were faced with more complicated power relationships, which was a consequence of the contested power relationships in relation to the Chinese and western social-cultural contexts. First, of all the research participants, *Education* students were faced with more UK-specific knowledge delivered in language itself characterised by a substantial social-cultural dimension. And, more importantly, they were expected to take the shift in disciplinary identities a significant step further through learning to represent knowledge in an unfamiliar kind of writing style and subject genres (Lea and Street, 2006), and in English.

Second, although the students generally claimed not to be surprised by the western requirement for good essay-writing, the great majority of them experienced frustrations in the actual practice of writing essays. This dilemma was more common amongst the *Education* students, whose marks from teachers for written work were usually lower than they had expected. In part, this may have stemmed from uncertainty and confusion about the precise meanings of some key concepts that were western-derived as well as discipline-specific. Furthermore, some students even thought that writing requirements reflected their teachers' individual preferences in assessing academic work, rather than well-established and widely accepted grading criteria for Master's level within the disciplines concerned.

Nevertheless, this may not be exclusive to Chinese students, because as Stierer's inquiry (2000) demonstrated, UK students can have similar misunderstandings.

Alternatively, this misunderstanding may also be related to contested power relationships between western and Chinese pedagogical cultures, more specifically, with respect to how critical thinking can be legitimately approached. This will be re-visited in *Critical thinking and analysis*.

### Merging the professional stance with the academic stance

While students' writing challenges have been well-observed at the undergraduate level (for example, Batholomae, 1985), writing experiences of Master's students – and especially those of Chinese Master's students – have attracted little attention. In filling in that gap, the current research shows that, compared to writing in their earlier education, these Chinese students' writing difficulties in their second degree learning in the UK were considerable and served to undermine their self-confidence. Compared to undergraduates, overcoming the writing challenge was even harder for these Chinese Master's students, and not simply because of the condensed Master's year or the need to write in a non-native language, but also because of the exacting nature of discipline-specific writing at postgraduate level, where a student is also expected to communicate at a level closer to that of an expert practitioner. Both Schulman's three apprenticeships (2005) – cognitive, practical and moral – apprenticeships and McCune and Hounsell's concept of ways of thinking and practising (2005) are of relevance here, but it must also be noted that the requirements of Master's writing also reflect the fact that (as we also saw in the literature review) Master's education is distinctive from undergraduate education in terms of its greater practice-orientation (Knight, 1997), as a recent QAA Scotland publication makes clear:

...Master's-level study involves 'becoming' part of a community or culture, whether in academe or in other professions. Master's students are on the cusp of the line of becoming peers rather than being students. (QAA Scotland, p.7)

'Becoming peers rather than being students' also entails, it should also be noted, the necessity of combining academic discourses and professional ones at Master's level.

This added to the challenge for the research participants, none of whom was able to bring a fully-fledged professional identity to their critical analysis and academic writing. There were also, not surprisingly, subject differences.

The *Education* students were the least affected by the need to combine an academic with a professional stance in their written work. This may reflect the fact that, as the softest discipline, *Education* made fewer demands upon students to apply practical, 'on-the-job' knowledge; or it may be (as these findings suggest) that the teaching goal of this particular Master's programme in *Education* at the University of Edinburgh was mainly to train students to become independent academic researchers rather than professional practitioners such as schoolteachers.

By contrast, prior working experiences were important to writing requirements in *FI*: students were expected to show their ability to relate their prior working experiences to new knowledge and interpret cases from new working circumstances. Writing requirements of *SPC* appeared to sit in-between those of the *Education* and *FI* students. Whilst their prior knowledge was important to demonstrate their problem-solving skills in their writing practice, it was not necessary for them to have worked before embarking on the Master's programme.

Finally, it is also worth noting that while students' shortcomings in critical thinking and argumentation can be attributed to a significant extent to their difficulties in acquiring subject discourses, these shortcomings are more acutely in evidence in participants' writing. As Lillis (2001) has observed, academic writing stands for a particular form of privileged discourses which results in a more noticeable novice-expert power differential. Indeed, despite the fact that subject discourses are commonly viewed not as a constraint but as providing a platform through which to convey students' critical thinking (Bizzell, 2009; Stierer, 2000), this platform can be built only if students gain access to this power. Although subject discourses may be seen by expert-writers/academics as well-understood sets of conventions through which knowledge is shared, for student-writers they remain mysterious.

### Course-specific literacy requirements and exam constraints

As the preceding discussion intimates, subject discourses were not homogeneous across programmes, but could vary even within the same programme, requiring students to learn how to practise particular course-specific literacies. This was most problematic in the harder programmes (*FI* and *SPC*) where switching between genres of subject discourses was necessary – especially in exams, which were the predominant assessment method in *FI* and *SPC*. *SPC* students saw exams as contributing to their stresses, but it was also unsettling for the *FI* students who were busy with ‘course switching’ (Lea and Street, 1998, p.161) to cater for genre-specific and course-specific requirements. While both *FI* and *SPC* students were required to do more statistical calculations and report the calculation process in their exam answers, the *FI* students were additionally required (like *Education* students) to relate their analyses to previous studies. However, while coping with time constraints in exams was not a concern for *Education* students, it created stresses for the *FI* students. As a coping strategy, the *FI* students spent a considerable amount of time on preparing, summarising and organising subject-specific discourses to enable ‘easy [easier] retrieval from memory’ (Carvalho, 2012, p.15). To get high marks, these students were busy memorising as much as they could before exams. Correspondingly, less time was left for deeper learning. As a consequence, when reflecting on their approach to self-regulating their learning, more *FI* students were frustrated by thinking that they were surface learners.

#### *7.3.1.3 Critical and analytical thinking*

Analytical and critical thinking have been well-noted in the **Literature Review** as both a distinguishing feature and an indispensable requirement of academic literacy practices at Master’s level. This is not only because, compared to undergraduate learning, postgraduate education places greater emphasis on the development of students’ criticality as a formal requirement and criterion for grading, but also because students’ competence in proactively engaging in thinking critically, as a particular form of exercising autonomy in learning (Pemberton and Nix, 2012), is routinely expected at the Master’s level in the western learning context. More

holistically, extrapolating from notions of power and socialisation, ‘defending one’s point of view or trying to convince others of one’s arguments creates a sense of ownership in relation to knowledge...’ (Gram et al., 2013, p.766).

Within the literature, Chinese students’ shortcomings with respect to critical thinking have been presumed to be associated with their unfamiliarity with this requirement in a new Master’s-level and western cultural content. Yet whilst these two contextual dimensions were confirmed in the findings chapters as closely relevant to participants’ difficulties and problems, they do not appear to suffice in themselves to explain students’ problems in this regard: account also has to be taken of the dimension of subject matter, since critical thinking was conceptualised and realised differently across programmes.

Hence, Table 7.1 compiles five dilemmas that participants were found to struggle with, and where they were expected to practise and demonstrate their criticality in assessments and in everyday academic literacy practices.

<b>Five dilemmas</b>  <b>Programme</b>	<b>1. How to detach the role of writers from the discussed knowledge?</b>	<b>2. How to interpret knowledge that is socially-situated?</b>	<b>3. How to write drawing on previous working experiences?</b>	<b>4. How to develop criticality by reflecting reasoning in assessments</b>	<b>5. How to develop criticality by looking for the possibility of alternative criteria through problem-solving?</b>
<i>Education</i>	√	√			
<i>FI</i>	√	√	√		
<i>SPC</i>				√	√

**Table 7.1 Five dilemmas experienced by interviewees in practising critical thinking (by programme)**

As Table 7.1 indicates, the challenge of critical and analytical thinking was apparently at its greatest for the *Education* and *FI* students. This is because these softer disciplines had higher expectations of students in terms of their competence in critiquing previous research in particular, socially contextualised settings.

On the other hand, while *SPC* students struggled at the very least to practise criticality and express it in a western socio-culturally acceptable way and in English – as did their peer students in softer disciplines, nonetheless they did not find it quite so challenging to fulfil critical thinking to the level expected in their programme. However, they were challenged when they experienced dilemmas of the kind outlined in columns 4 and 5 in the Table.

#### Circumstance 1. How to detach the role of writers from the discussed knowledge?

This challenge was faced by the students of *Education* and *FI* programmes; however while the *Education* students struggled more with the social-cultural effect associated with subject discourses, the *FI* students were more challenged by their insufficient mastery of subject discourses.

The findings indicate that these Chinese informants found it hard to truly understand what the western-derived concept of critical thinking really meant and how to practise it in reality. This could be seen as related to differences between the Chinese and western pedagogical cultures. As a result, these students had somehow to reconcile their old conceptualisation of legitimated knowledge which had been shaped in China and the kind legitimated in the UK.

A striking illustration of this appears in one of the case studies (Tracy's case study on page 151): an *Education* student was unwilling to make revisions as suggested by her UK teacher to link two socio-culturally situated cases together. This is because she did not view this as a legitimate way to approach critical thinking in the western context:

... think critically is predicated on the assumption that the student is acculturated



enough to see relationships between various cultural phenomena...to assess the credibility of different kinds of sources...and to weigh various kinds of evidence... (Ramanathan and Kaplan, 1996, p. 27)

This student's conceptualisation of how to approach critical thinking had been shaped by her earlier education where she may have been accustomed to using Confucian sayings to support her views, rather than evidence of the kind preferred in the western pedagogical culture (Ramanathan and Kaplan, 1996). Therefore, it may be reasonable to speculate that the high respect accorded to previous literature may constrain Chinese students' willingness to detach themselves as a knowledge producer from the knowledge being discussed. As a consequence, they may hesitate to arrive at a distinctive position of their own from which to critique.

Even though some students' former conceptualisations may have been closer to the western kind, the weight of evidence showing that all *Education* and *FI* participants found critical thinking challenging suggests that their previous education did not get them sufficiently ready to practise it in a western way. Therefore, it is possible to argue that, as proposed by Heffernan et al. (2010), western pedagogies could be more carefully and systematically introduced to use with Chinese students.

### Circumstance 2. How to interpret socially-situated knowledge?

Due to the subject matter, the *FI* and especially the *Education* students were more likely to encounter socially-situated knowledge. Hence, they encountered difficulties when they tried to interpret knowledge of this kind, namely the need to offer critical analysis and the limited knowledge of relevant western contents and practices these students needed to draw on.

Nevertheless, there were some programme differences: while the *Education* students found themselves unable to or did not know how to critically analyse phenomena particular to China by applying western-developed theories, the *FI* students were less challenged in this respect, because they were generally required to focus only on western or international contexts.

### Circumstance 3. How to write drawing on previous working experiences?

A particular challenge for the *FI* students was the need to critique knowledge based on existing working experiences. As Koivista and Jokinen observe:

Practical experiences, for instance in working life, provide a solid ground for critical perspectives. Practical issues can offer you critical arguments when you reflect on a theory. In the same way, experiences can make more sense when you look at them in the light of a theory. Practical implications and links to practice usually make learning easier and keep you interested and involved in a dialogue. (Koivista and Jokinen, 2007, p. 6)

Unfortunately, the *FI* students interviewed in the present study had little working experience to draw upon (which was why most *FI* participants found group discussion with more experienced western peers was more rewarding).

### Circumstance 4. How to develop criticality by reflecting reasoning from assessments?

Critical thinking and logical reasoning have been generally recognised as an important concomitant of success (Graham et al., 2012). This is because:

...a robust conception of critical thinking [for Engineering] includes not only the process leading from information to a valid conclusion, it must also include the process by which we ask, in parallel, 'Is my thinking healthy?' ... (Niewoehner and Steidle, 2009, p.10)

...[Engineering] Students who can memorize formulas and crank out numerical problems on our in-class examinations often lack the skills to carefully analyse a problem, identify the key requirements and constraints in real world problems. (Graham et al., 2012, p.11)

Despite this, the SPC participants were less able to recognise that one of their assessment methods – writing lab-books – could help them to reflect on their reasoning processes in academic tasks and when programming on computer. Therefore, it can be speculated that they were unable to benefit from this assessment. Nevertheless, two participants did recognise the significance of reflection about their own thinking processes, as a component of critical thinking in SPC, through peer discussion (Charles, on page 173) and writing in exams (Mike, on page 199).

#### Circumstance 5. How to develop criticality by looking for the possibility of alternative criteria through problem-solving?

Be the case that the majority of *SPC* students were this Circumstance. Interpreting from Freeman's point of view (2001), it may be aware of the need to satisfy two levels of thinking when practising academic literacies in assessments, namely looking for solutions to fulfill given marking criteria and a higher level of thinking, and searching for better solutions to improve the task outcomes. However, only one student addressed the latter level of learning (Mike). Accordingly, students on this *SPC* programme may be more likely to be challenged by being unable to recognise the importance of making 'a carefully and creatively reasoned choice than to be forced into defending or retracting a decision as a result of information that had not previously been considered' (Freeman, 2001, p.3).

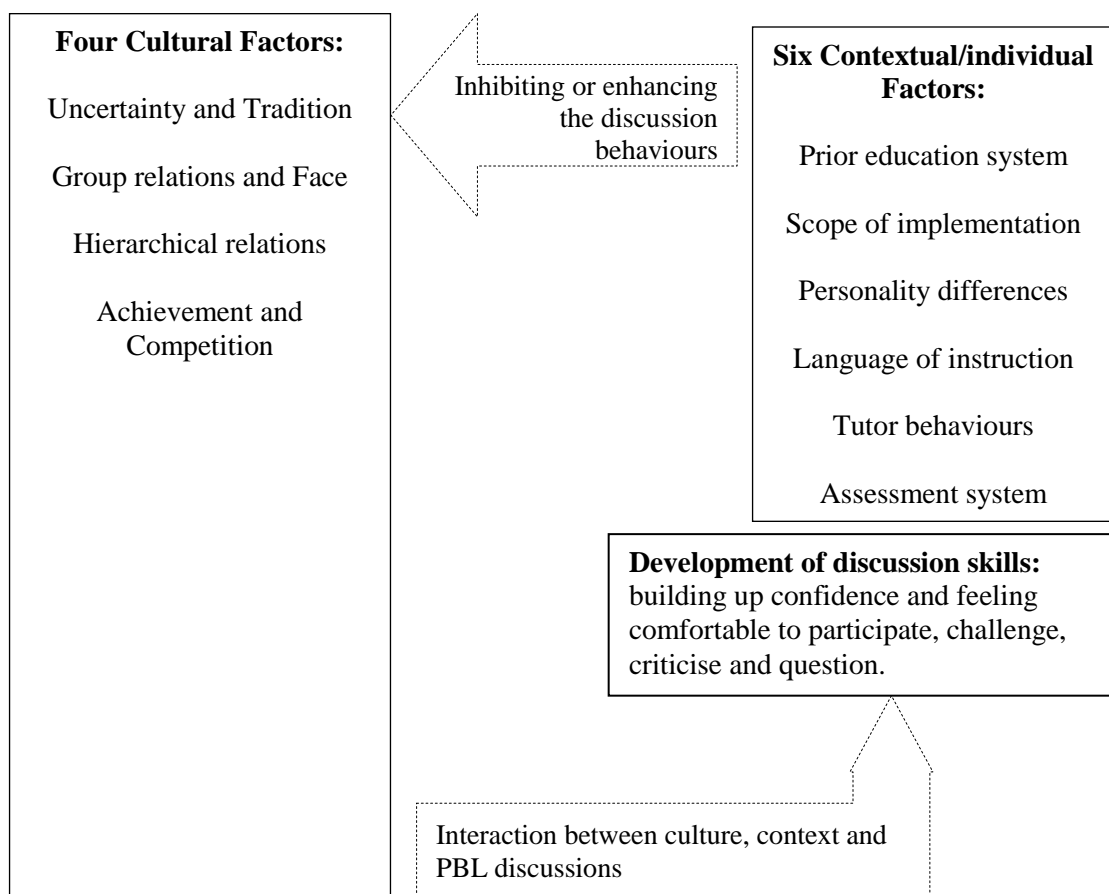
#### *7.3.1.4 Interaction with teachers and peers*

The findings of this study, as we have seen, point to the social as well as the individual character of autonomy in learning: social interaction helps to promote students' deep engagement in learning. However this is not limited to learning outcomes resulting from cognitive processing activities. In this view of socially-situated and socially-constructed learning, the western learning environment provides opportunities for each community member to practise a new way of cultural communication. This is especially significant in Master's programmes which are practice-orientated, because students are able to make conscious or unconscious connections between new socio-cultural discourses and their existing knowledge; but it is of even greater importance to Chinese students, because interacting with western peers as the dominant cultural group is a powerful means of acquiring socially-situated literacies. Nevertheless, achieving these purposes is dependent upon the degree of student cultural interaction with teachers and peers.

In the **Literature Review**, it was shown that Chinese students' communication styles have been extensively researched from a cultural perspective, either by using the 'large culture' or 'small culture' approach. For 'large culture' researchers, Chinese students' poor performance in interaction is associated with their collectivist

culture (Blumenthal, 1977) and avoidance of conflict (McMahon, 2011), while for ‘small cultures’ researchers too, Chinese students tend to avoid conflicts, but this does not mean they blindly follow others’ views (Wang et al., 2011). However, most previous studies tend to attribute Chinese students’ communication style to the collectivistic nature of the Chinese culture, in contrast with the individualistic nature of western cultures.

The findings of the current inquiry suggest that neither perspective is adequate in itself. Indeed, the current findings are in agreement with what Park et al. (2012) concluded: the impact of individual differences is larger than the cultural impact. A similar conclusion was drawn in Farmbach et al.’s research (2013) comparing Hong Kong undergraduate students to other cultural groups, where the findings pointed to the need to co-construct ‘the large culture’ approach and ‘the small cultures’ approach. Four cultural factors and six contextual/individual factors were seen as relevant, as summarised in Figure 7.7. The interplay between these two sets of factors helped to develop students’ discussion skills and shape their discussion performances.



**Figure 7.7 Four cultural factors and six contextual/individual factors seen as related to students’ discussion skills and behaviours (reproduced from Frambach et al., 2013, p.9)**

Although the current findings correspond to some of the factors displayed in Figure 7.7 (such as students’ language barrier associated with avoidance of losing face), other factors do not appear to be significant – for instance, the prior education system, which was irrelevant to or even inhibiting to students’ engagement in interaction with westerners. Intriguingly, short-term pre-sessional EAP courses provided by the University seemed to help students to build up their self-confidence and sense of comfort in speaking in a multi-cultural environment (even if they had a less noticeable effect on students’ language improvement) and both tended to be built up and maintained in a general sense. Moreover, another individual difference which did emerge as important was individuals’ ‘cultural scripts’ (Welikala and Watkins, 2008) and individuals’ self-positioning in relation to ‘others’. These two factors were closely linked to students’ engagement in interaction with teachers and peers as a component of Masters’ literacies. Furthermore, they could be seen as

empowering students' socio-cultural acculturation and identity transformation from a marginal to a more central position in the dominant western community.

The findings chapters also make it possible to view students' cultural scripts as a form of socio-cultural capital enabling them to negotiate power relationships according to 'the rules'. Cultural scripts were not an innate competence but could be accumulated through trial-and-error, where students were willing to strike up a conversation.

#### Awareness of others (Pusch, 1979)

Although Pusch's concept of ethnocentrism (1979) (reported in Wan, 1999) is not relevant to participants, his concept of 'awareness' does seem relevant in understanding students' interactions. Through the media and other sources of information in China, every participant had heard about or had even gained some experience of learning in western countries, and awareness of others influenced how students reacted to opportunities for interaction in an unfamiliar discourse community. As Pusch argued, where participants perceived 'the other' (in other words, the dominant culture and its discourse patterns) as necessary competences to be acquired in order to socialise in a given community, they were bolder in confronting an unfamiliar social situation and more likely to actively participate in interactions. Conversely, if students viewed 'the other' as an unwelcome imposition that undermined their Chinese cultural identity and took away their self-esteem/confidence, they were more likely to avoid interaction with others they did not think of as belonging to 'our group'.

#### 'Inside and outside relations' (Scollon and Scollon, 1991, p.118)

Scollon and Scollon's concept of inside and outside relations (1991) also has some relevance. Chinese students' preference for forming their own learning community seemed to help their learning of subject knowledge but inhibit their language improvement in relation to their socialisation in the new community. Whereas this finding echoes previous studies, what has not yet been discussed elsewhere is that a conceptualisation towards inside and outside relations in some participants' minds

promoted their deep engagement when communicating with non-Chinese peers. This is because, when participating in a group discussion, some informants conceived of themselves as Chinese people in a plural rather than singular sense, for example, as a representative of the Chinese discourse group, and therefore were more motivated by an anxiety of not being looked down upon by the dominant cultural group and a requirement to enhance self-image. Moreover, they were more prone to use the western discourse pattern, for the purpose of improving their western peers' image of Chinese students' language barrier. For example, some *FI* students indicated that they were more willing to speak and to share tasks when in groups with western peers with whom they were not familiar. This phenomenon is interpreted by Tajfel (1984):

[W]hen social groups differ in status and power, strategies aiming to maintain a satisfactory social identity and to achieve positive distinctiveness from other relevant groups on certain relevant dimensions of comparison do undoubtedly continue to play an important role in collective behaviour. (p.699)

As reviewed previously, a substantial volume of research on transition has highlighted students' processes of acculturation coupled with their psychological journeys, (for example, the U-curve Model coupled with 'culture shock' (on page 58-59), and Brown and Holloway's adjustment model at three stages of students' journeys (on page 65). However, pinpointing a student's particular transitional stage seems to be less important in the present research, since any transitional stage that a participant could be linked proved relatively temporary and developed dynamically. The academic literacies practices and performances of participants' could be seen a result of how they perceived self-other power relationships and how they positioned themselves to resolve tensions between the two. Hence, trying to assess students' stages of transition as if they were 'frozen' in time is neither feasible nor appropriate, and may blind one to the students' individuality. However, the perspective of transition remains meaningful for the current study because evaluating students' processes of transition in a general sense has been demonstrated as insightful and fruitful in illuminating the four main facets of academic literacies at the Master's level. However, as will also have been self-evident, characterising

Masters' literacies is far from straightforward: all four main components are inseparable and interwoven.

### *7.3.2 A reflective approach to managing challenges of Masters' Literacies and terms of engagement*

As articulated here, the concept of 'Masters' Literacies' provides a basis for understanding the interrelated and holistic nature of the four components of which it is made up and which were necessary for these Chinese students' socialisation and identity transformation in western postgraduate discourse communities.

Given the fact that none of participants showed themselves capable of practising academic literacies with experts' confidence and authority, it would be unrealistic to expect full socialisation and identity transformation – and not simply because of the condensed length of Master's learning and tightly scheduled programme design. It is more likely to be related to the non-linear nature of literacy acquisition, how students conceived of the requirements of Masters' literacies, and their apparent resolve to proceed 'thus far but no further' with respect to the relevant 'terms of engagement'.

#### *7.3.2.1 Masters' literacies and identity transformation*

Students' conceptualisation of Masters' literacies were related to their attitudes towards making changes. Their acquisition of Masters' literacies could be stuck if they viewed it as an external imposition and if they saw the need to make changes as temporary and extrinsic rather than a lifelong internal change. Conversely, students progressed well if they interpreted this as a need to change habits of mind as well as social practices.



### *7.3.2.2 Students' decisions and the 'terms of engagement'*

Moreover, students' 'thus far but no further' decisions about terms of engagement (namely, how much time and effort they needed to devote to attain expected results) also appeared to be important. This kind of student decision-making was apparent when students faced a particular academic task or a particular literacy practice, but it was also a more general decision-making process when students decided in which positions they wished to be situated in the new community after almost one-year of Master's learning.

### *7.3.2.3 The non-linear development of literacy acquisition and self-confidence*

It seems that hardly any student was able to acquire and develop their literacies in a smooth and sustainable way over the course of their Master's programme: none was consistently able to discern what they should learn and take the initiative immediately to change their behaviour. The difficulties of so doing were compounded by multiple and simultaneous power relations giving rise to various kinds of conflicts and tensions. However, even where students were capable of successfully surviving all difficult situations, the anxieties and stresses they experienced could make it hard for them to stay motivated and self-confident, with a consequent risk of 'failure expectation' (Vermunt and Verloop, 1999, p.261) with respect to their future literacy practices.

## **7.4 Implications**

### *7.4.1 Implications from a conceptual perspective*

Findings from this study support those reported in the review of literature where a detailed account is given of current conceptualisations of academic literacy practices, and of what Welikala and Watkins (2008) call 'cultural scripts'. However, what has emerged clearly from the current research into Master's students experiences of learning in the UK, is that the cultural dimension, and its impact on student learning, is more complex than has previously been recognised. Previous studies have

focused mainly on undergraduate student learning, most often in their home countries, and there has been little research into postgraduate student learning and the additional cultural demands made on such students when their postgraduate studies are in very different cultural contexts.

Several key implications for future research flow from this: future research should focus on the cultural dimension of student learning in other Western countries and investigate whether the findings from the current study are replicated; and research should be done on whether the experiences of international students from countries other than China, who have completed their first degree in their home country and come to the UK for their postgraduate study, are similar to those of the participants in this study. Of particular interest in such research would be the extent to which concept of Masters' Literacies proved useful and, if it did, what would this look like in other international contexts.

A second but equally important consideration which emerged from analysis of the data is the influence of subject matter on the development of students' 'cultural scripts'. Welikala and Watkins' (2008) conceptualisation of 'cultural scripts' did not address this issue, yet it is evident that subject matter does indeed have an impact on the 'scripts' that the postgraduate students in this study created. The concept of 'cultural scripts' therefore, although it contributes to our understanding of the cultural dimension of student learning, needs to be expanded to include the subject dimension and the influence that this has on the development of such scripts. Of particular interest here is the extent to which students in this study, in contrast to findings from earlier research, were aware of the impact of the subject on the formation of their individual and collective 'scripts'. In those cases where students failed to negotiate power relationships between the dominant western culture, and instead adhered to traditional Chinese values and cultural approaches, there was a negative impact on their ability to socialise and become involved in subject-specific discourses and practices. Interestingly, this was particularly evident in 'softer' disciplines (for example, in the Business School) which relied heavily on communication between students and between students and their teachers. Further

research in a wide range of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ subjects, in both western and international contexts, would inform any reconceptualisation of the notion of ‘cultural scripts’ and contribute to the development of its original – fairly narrow – conceptualisation.

A final but important point to be made here concerns students’ reports that to cope with the demands of the subject in this western context they instinctively grouped together in order to form a supportive learning community. However, students (particularly *FI* students) were aware that while this supported them to some extent with their learning, the decision to separate themselves from their western peers had negative consequences, such as feeling increasingly marginalised from their western peers who comprised the dominant group; failing to develop positive and productive social relationships; losing confidence in their ability to initiate and contribute to disciplinary discussions; and minimising opportunities to engage western peers in discussions about the subject content of the programme. Thus the opportunities to develop useful and productive ‘cultural scripts’ were reduced by the inappropriate and ultimately negative coping strategies they adopted to deal with the subject and social demands of postgraduate study in the UK.

#### *7.4.2 Implications from a methodological perspective*

It has been noted in the **Research Design** chapter that careful thought was given to the most appropriate approach for gathering data, to what approaches would be ‘fit for purpose’, and the strengths and possible limitations of different methods were considered. For the current study semi-structured interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate data-gathering tool for answering the research questions. However, it must be recognised that alternative/additional approaches may have generated equally valuable data, and that a mixed-methods design would have allowed for increased opportunities to consider methodological validity and to triangulate findings. This may have been particularly fruitful as greater insights into how Chinese Master’s students acquire and develop academic literacies could have been achieved.

For example, although interviews are advantageous in that they bring participants' voices to the fore, and allow researchers to probe and engage actively in interactions with participants to build rich narratives, observations would have provided an opportunity for the researcher to see how the participants negotiated the subject specific literacies required for their programmes; how they coped with western pedagogical practices; and how they interacted with peers and teachers. However, observation of participants would not have been possible out with the classroom, and since gaining an understanding of how these students coped in their social lives as well as their academic lives was equally important, challenges would have been introduced had this method been adopted. Further, given the hierarchical nature of Chinese culture, and the possibility that the participants would behave differently when they were being observed because they were not confident about the social status of the observer who they may perceive to 'above' them in the social order, it was decided that observations would not be appropriate or useful in the current study.

To allow for a significantly greater sample, and to include a much wider range of programmes and students from different cultural contexts, a way ahead in future research may be to devise a series of questionnaires which require both qualitative and quantitative responses from participants, to be administered at the same stages of the participants' Master's journeys as the current research, thereby maintaining the longitudinal element of the research design. While the detailed and nuanced responses gained from interviews would not be available, because of the significant increase in sample size, it may be possible to generalise tentatively to the wider population of international students studying for higher degrees in the UK, having completed undergraduate qualifications in their own countries. This would allow for a much fuller account of the concept of Masters' Literacies, involving students from a wide range of disciplines, and gathering students' views of the usefulness of this concept, and the implications that arise from its adoption and operationalisation in universities could be explored to a much greater degree than was possible in the current study. If the sample was also to include UK teachers and UK students who are the dominant group, different, possible contrasting and even contradictory

findings could emerge in comparison to those of this current research. This could be a particularly fruitful direction for future research.

Finally, given that a key finding from the current research revealed that the challenges that participants grappled with during their language transition, particularly with academic writing, influenced every other transition to differing degrees, a fourth phase could have been added to the current research design to include a focus on the dissertation component. This requires high levels of academic literacy skills as students read, make sense of that reading, and then produce extended pieces of writing in the genre, style and form required for their particular subject areas. Such research would inform the concept of Masters' Literacies and the ways in which universities in general, and specific subject areas in particular, develop academic literacy practices to support all students, but particularly international students as they strive to acquire the literacy skills necessary for success at this level of study.

#### *7.4.3 Implications from a practical perspective*

The preceding sections have highlighted several important implications which arise from the findings of this study, and suggestions have been made about possible future research. This final section considers what could be done by universities to help Master's students, on intensive and densely-packed programmes, become confident, autonomous learners who are able to identify and adopt appropriate coping strategies when they encounter difficulties and challenges with their learning.

Support offered should not be a 'one off' series of seminars, or a week's course on Masters' Literacies, but rather should be available from the outset throughout the programmes. It should be offered by specialist teachers who are familiar with subject-specific reading and writing genres, who can move beyond what Hartley and his colleagues (2011) describe as simply helping students to recognise the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' work, and teach students about the specific underlying structural features and linguistic structures which characterise texts in the subject area (Stierer, 2000), rather than by generic workshop tutors who do not possess such

subject specific knowledge. Close collaboration between different staff in the university responsible for supporting students' academic literacy would result in a shared understanding of subject-specific genres and conventions, and key threshold concepts would no longer be mysterious to new Master's students, especially new Chinese students.

The findings from this study have demonstrated clearly the importance of interaction and communication between students, and between teachers and students, for student learning. There should therefore be a significant focus on developing Master's students' oral communication skills which are essential for successfully acquiring the literacy skills required for study at this level. Being able to interact confidently with teachers, who can encourage students to reflect on their learning, would help students to examine their coping strategies, evaluate their effectiveness, and consider alternative approaches. Such interactions would also help students to gain a greater sense of control over their learning journeys, would improve their confidence in themselves as learners, and would encourage a view of learning as a collaborative enterprise between teacher and learner, rather than as a lonely, isolated and isolating experience.

Universities could, as a matter of course, allow students for whom English is not their first language to have extra time with examinations which would help them to cope with the language barriers which they frequently encounter in examinations. Finally, while these suggestions relate directly to UK universities and the teachers who teach students on Master's programmes, consideration should also be given by universities in China to how they could better prepare undergraduate students to cope with the demands of Master's level learning and study, particularly Master's learning in western universities. A significant – and ever-increasing number of Chinese students are coming to the UK to study at Master's level in a huge range of subject areas, and it is the responsibility not only of the UK universities but also of the Chinese universities to find ways to support such students and help them to cope with the many and complex demands – academic and social – that are made on them during their Master's journeys.

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## APPENDICES

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### Appendix 1. Interview Schedule Phase 1

Gender	Age
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#### Section A. Key differences of studying in China and in the UK

##### 中英学习经历的不同

Now, you are doing a second degree after a first degree, so far, what would you say about the key differences between study in China and UK?

继第一学位以后，现在你在英国开始了第二学位的学习，能否谈一下你认为自己在中国和英国的学习经历中的不同之处？

#### Section B. Beliefs About 'teaching' and 'learning'

##### 对‘教’与‘学’的看法

1. What do 'teaching' and 'learning' at university mean to you?

你是怎样理解在大学中的‘教’与‘学’的？

2. What does it mean to you to learn something well? Why is that do you think?

你是怎么理解‘学好’的？为什么你会这样认为？

3. Why does it mean to you to teach something well? Why is that do you think?

你是怎么理解‘教好’的？为什么你会这样认为？

#### Section C. The experience of studying undergraduate course in China

##### 在中国的本科学习生活

1. What was the title of your first degree and your university in China? Was your university far away from your home town?

在中国，你在那所大学就读？所得学位是什么？专业是什么？你是否离开家乡就读的大学？

2. When did you graduate from the first degree in China? What did you do after the graduation?

你本科时何时毕业的？毕业后，你做了些什么？

3. What sorts of working experience have you got (details, dates and duration)?

你具备什么样的工作经验（具体信息，时间段）？

4. What mainly motivated you to study for your undergraduate degree?

你认为你在本科学习中的动力是什么？

5. Do you think your motivation for doing the degree affected how you went about your learning/studying? If so, in what ways?

你认为你的学习动力影响了你的学习方式吗？是怎么影响的？

6. What made for a good undergraduate student in China?

在中国，怎样才算是好（合格、优秀）的本科生？

7. What made for a good university teacher in your first degree in China?

在来英国之前，你认为什么样的大学老师是好的？作为一个好老师，他们应该具备怎么样的条件？

8. What were relations like between undergraduate student and their teachers in China?

你在中国读本科室的师生关系是怎样的？

9. What was the main way in which you were taught as a undergraduate in China?

你在中国读本科室，最主要的授课方式是什么？

10. What did you find the most rewarding, challenging and interesting about your experience at undergraduate level in China?

在中国的本科学习经历中，你认为哪些方面最有价值、有挑战性或者最有趣？

11. What did you find the least rewarding, challenging and interesting about your experience at undergraduate level in China?

在本科的学习经历中，你认为有哪些方面最没价值、最美挑战性或者最无聊？

#### *Section D. The experience of studying postgraduate course in the UK*

##### *在英国的硕士学习生活*

1. When did you come to Edinburgh? Has any family member or good friend come with you?

你来爱丁堡多久了？是否你的朋友或亲戚和你一起？

2. What sorts of students are taking your programme? Where do fellow students come from? How are the other students getting on?

选择读你这个课程的同学是什么样的专业背景？他们是来自于哪些国家或者城市？他们的学习和生活进展如何？

3. Did you have an orientation programme? How helpful did you find?

你参加过学习迎新活动吗？他对你有什么帮助？

4. Did you meet new friends? Is there somewhere you can meet up? How is your life outside the campus?

你有没有认识新的朋友？ 你们有会面地点吗？ 你的课余生活是怎样的？

5. Which courses are you doing in the Master's programme?

你选了哪些课程？

6. What have those courses been like so far? What has the teaching been like? What has the workload been like?

就目前为止，你如何评价你的研究生课程？ 如何评价课堂上的教学行为？ 如果评价课业量？

7. What do your tutors expect you to do outside classes? How have you found the courses' readings so far?

你认为你的老师希望你在课外再做些什么、或者希望你在课外有什么可以发展的？ 你对课程所要求的阅读是怎样评价的？

8. What has mainly motivated you to study for your postgraduate degree abroad?

你为何选择在海外读硕士？

9. What has mainly motivated you to choose this institution?

你为何选择这所学校？

10. What do you expect to learn from studying at Edinburgh University?

你期待在爱丁堡大学的硕士学习中获得什么呢？

11. What has mainly motivated you to study now?

你现在的学习动力是什么？

12. Do you think your motivation for doing the postgraduate degree is affecting how you go about your learning/studying? If so, in what ways?

你认为你的学习动力影响了你的学习方式吗？ 是怎么影响的？

13. What are the main qualities, do you think, that make for a good postgraduate student in the UK educational system? Which of those qualities, do you think you have already got?

你认为英国的教育制度下，具备什么样素质的学生被视为好学生？ 你认为你已经具备了哪些素质？

14. What do you think makes for a good university teacher in the UK?

现在你已来到英国就读研究生课程，你认为在英国什么样的大学老师是好的？

15. What sorts of contexts with tutors have you had so far?

你现在的老师是什么样子的？

16. What in your experience, are relations like between postgraduate students and their tutors in the UK? How do you feel about that?

目前为止，能否描述一下在你英国硕士学习生活中体会到的师生关系？为什么

你这么认为？

Has that been surprised you? In what way?

你有觉得意外或不不一样的地方吗？表现在哪些方面？

17. Are there any (other) aspects of studying at Edinburgh so far that have surprised you?

在英国的教课和学习生活中，（还）有没有什么经历或者现象让你觉得意外或者不一样的地方？

In what way, have you surprised? Why?

哪些方面让你感到意外，为什么？

18. Thinking about your study in Edinburgh, in general, how well have you settled down so far?

到目前为止，你认为你的适应情况如何？

19. So far, what do you find the most rewarding, challenging and interesting about your experience at postgraduate level in the UK?

到目前为止，在硕士学习经历中，你认为哪些方面最有价值、有挑战性或最有趣？

20. So far, What do you find the least rewarding, challenging and interesting about your experience at postgraduate level in the UK?

到目前为止，在硕士学习经历中，你认为哪些方面最没价值、最没挑战性或最无聊？

21. Thinking about your studies so far in Edinburgh, what do you think have been your main strengths and successes?

在爱丁堡的学习生活中，你认为你的优势是什么？你在哪些方面做得比较成功？

22. So far, what sorts of things have you found a bit more difficult in your studies at Edinburgh? Who are you going to look for helps?

在爱丁堡的学习生活中，你认为哪些方面比较难适应或者遇到困难，瓶颈的？

23. Are there particular difficulties for master's students, whose 1st language is not English?

对于英语不是其母语的硕士生来讲，有哪些方面是特别困难的？

24. What advice would be helpful in advance for Chinese students coming to study for a postgraduate degree in the UK?

对于即将来英的硕士留学生，你会给出怎样的建议？

### *E. Closing questions*

1. Are there any other aspects of postgraduate life in Edinburgh you would like to

mention?

除了以上问题，你是否希望和我讨论其他关于爱丁堡硕士生活的问题？

2. Are there any questions you would like to ask me?

在这次采访将结束前，你是否还有其他问题？

## **Appendix 2. Interview Schedule Phase 2**

### *Section A. Key differences of studying in China and in the UK*

#### *中英学习经历的不同*

Now, you have studied in Edinburgh for 5 months, what would you say are the key differences between study in China and UK?

现在你在爱丁堡学习了 5 个月了，能否谈一下你认为自己在中国和英国的学习经历中的不同之处？

### *Section B. Beliefs About 'teaching' and 'learning'*

#### *对‘教’与‘学’的看法*

1. In the last interview, we talked about what good “learning” and “teaching” mean to you with respect to the MSc programme.

Any changes in what you thought were good “learning” and “teaching”?

在上一阶段的访问时，我们讨论了在你这个专业学习中的好的“学”与“教”是什么样子的。现在对第一阶段的观点有无改变呢？

I'd like you to explain it by giving examples (things happened recently).

能不能举些最近发生的事情为例子来说明你对好的“学”与“教”的理解？

2. What are the main qualities, do you think, that make for a good student on your particular master programme?

在你所学的硕士课程中，你认为好学生需要具备什么素质？

3. Which of those qualities, do you think you have? Did you have them BEFORE you started the programme OR have developed ON the programme? Why are they important?

你认为你已具备了哪些素质？你是在课程行进中学到了这些素质还是在课程开始前就已经具备了？为什么你认为他们重要？

4. What do you think makes for a good university teacher on a master's programme like this one?

你认为在你所读的硕士课程中,什么样的大学老师是好的？

### *Section C. The experience of studying postgraduate course in the UK*

#### *在英国的硕士学习生活*

1. How have you been getting on in general?

你的学习和生活进展如何？

2. Did you meet new friends? Is there somewhere you can meet up? How is your life outside the campus?

你有没有认识新的朋友？你们有会面地点吗？您的课余生活是怎样的？



3. What modules have you taken this semester?

你这学期选了哪些课程？

4. What has your master programme overall been like so far? How have you been doing (on this master's programme)?

就目前为止，你的整个研究生课程是什么样子的？你的进展如何？

5. (for each module: How does it compare with other modules you have done?)

What has the teaching been like on each module? What has the workload been like on that module?

课堂上的教学行为是什么样的？课业量怎么样？

What does that tutor expect you to do outside classes?

你认为你的老师希望你在课外再做些什么或者希望你在课外发展些什么？

How have you found the courses' readings so far on that module?

你认为你课程所要求的阅读怎么样？

6. What mainly motivates you to study right now?

你此时此刻的学习动力是什么？

7. What in your experience, are relations like between postgraduate students and their tutors on the master programme? How do you feel about that?

能否描述一下在你的研究生课程学习经历中体会到的师生关系？你是怎样感觉的？

Has that surprised you? In what way?

你有觉得意外或不一样的地方吗？表现在哪些方面？

8. Are there any (other) aspects of studying at Edinburgh so far that have surprised you?

在英国的教课和学习生活中，（还）有没有什么经历或者现象让你觉得意外或者不一样的地方？

9. How do you go about managing study time on your programme? How do you find it works?

在管理和分配时间方面，你是怎样做的？在那些方面，你认为他们有用？

10. What assessments have you done so far?

到目前，你所经历的课程评估方式是什么？

11. (for each module/each kind of assessment)

How did you find doing this exam/assignment/essay/presentation?

对于解答考试//完成作业/撰写论文/做讲演，你是怎样想的/你感觉怎么样？

What do you think you learnt from doing that exam/assignment/essay/presentation, before you got any feedback?

在拿到 feedback 前，从解答考试/完成作业/撰写论文/做讲演中，你学到了些什么？

How do you get any sense of how you are progressing on in that module? 你认为你

各科目的学习进展怎么样？

What feedback did you get from tutors? When and How did you get it?

老师对你的反馈是什么？何时反馈且以何种方式反馈？

How did you find the feedback?

对于老师的评语或回反馈后，你有什么感觉或想法吗？

What did you do, after receiving tutors' feedback?

在收到老师评语后，你做了些什么？

What makes for a good exam answer/assignment/essay/presentation?

合格（优秀）的考试解答/作业/论文/讲演是什么样子的？

12. Now you have been in Edinburgh for 5 months, how settled in do you feel? In what ways and examples?

到目前为止你已经在爱丁堡生活 5 个月了，你认为你的适应情况如何？请举例说明以何种方式体现？

13. What have you found most rewarding and least rewarding about your PG experiences on this master programme so far?

在你所经历的研究生课程学习中，你认为哪些方面最有价值和最没价值？

How did you cope with it?

你是怎样应对的？

14. What do you find most challenging and least challenging aspects of about your PG experience on this master programme so far?

在你研究生课程的学习过程中，你认为哪些方面最有挑战和最没挑战？

How did you cope with it?

你是怎样应对的？

15. What would you see as your biggest achievement so far on your master programme?

在你所经历的研究生课程学习中，你认为你的成就是什么？

16. If you have difficulties, how do you tackle them? Do you go to anyone for help? And if so, who?

如果有困难，你是如何处理的？你会向谁求助吗？如果会，都是谁？

17. Now you have been Edinburgh for a while, how are you getting on studying in English?

你到爱丁堡一段时间了，对于用英语学习你的进展如何？

你是怎样应对英语学习的？

18. Are there any particular difficulties for master's students, whose 1st language is not English?

对于英语不是其母语的硕士生来讲，有哪些方面是特别困难的？

19. If someone was thinking of studying for a Master's programme, would you recommend your programme to them?

如果有即将来英的硕士留学生，你会建议他们读你所读的学科和专业吗？

*D. Closing questions*

1. Are there any other aspects of postgraduate life in Edinburgh you would like to mention?

除了以上问题，你是否希望和我讨论其他关于爱丁堡硕士生活的问题？

2. Are there any questions you would like to ask me?

在这次采访将结束前，你是否还有其他问题？

3. Once you would get the feedback, can I email you?

拿到 feedback 后，我能否联系你呢？

4. I'd like to interview you again, can we make a time in May/Jun?

我们能否在 5 月制定见面的时间呢？

### **Appendix 3. Interview Schedule Phase 3**

#### *Section A. Your adaptation*

##### *你的适应情况*

Now, you've been in Edinburgh for nearly 10 months, how have you been getting on since we last talked?

What lead you to think that?

你的学习和生活进展如何？为什么你会这么想？

#### *Section B. Changes of views*

##### *你的观点是否变化*

1. In last interview, we talked about three things: differences between study in China and in the UK, good 'learning' and 'teaching' AND qualities of being a good university tutor and a student. Can you give an example to indicate your recent views?

在上一阶段的访问时，我们讨论了在你这个专业学习中的好的‘学’与‘教’是什么样子的。现在能不能举些最近发生的例子来体现你对好的‘学’与‘教’的理解？

2. Do you have any changes about the views on good 'learning' and 'teaching', compared with your views in last interview?

你现在对于好的‘教’与‘学’有什么不同理解吗？

3. Do you have any changes about the views on qualities of being a good university tutor and a student, compared with your views in last interview?

你认为在你所读的硕士课程中,什么样的大学老师是好的？（作为一个好老师，他们应该具备怎么样的条件？）

4. Do you have any changes about the views on study in China and in the UK, compared with your views in last interview?

和上一次我们讨论的内容相比，你现在对于中英学习的经历有什么不同的观点吗？

#### *Section C. The experience of studying postgraduate course in this semester*

##### *在英国的硕士学习生活*

Since we last talked, what did you find the most rewarding and challenging so far?

自从上次访谈后，你是否发现一些有价值和有挑战的事？

#### *Section D. Assessment*

##### *课程评估*

1. Can I just check what assessments have you done in the Semester 2?

(exams/course work assignments: for example, report, essays, presentations)  
在第二学期中, 你所经历的评估方式是什么? (考试/课程作业: eg. 报告, 论文, 讲演)

2. How did you find doing this exam /assignment/essay/presentation?

对于考试解答/作业/论文/做讲演, 你是怎样想的/你感觉怎么样?

3. What do you think you learnt from doing that exam answer/assignment/essay/presentation?

从考试解答/完成作业/撰写论文/做讲演中, 你学到了些什么?

4. What did you do, after receiving tutors' feedback?

(from different written/oral/individual/group feedback)(from each module)(Is it different from other kinds?)

在收到老师评语后, 你做了些什么?

(从不同形式的反馈和不同的 module 出发分析) (此种反馈和其他形式反馈有不同吗?)

5. What feedback did you get? When and How did you get it? (written?oral?)

老师对你的反馈是什么? 何时反馈且以何种方式反馈? (书面? 口头?)

6. What did you learn from the feedback?

拿到老师的评语和反馈后, 你有什么感觉或想法吗?

7. What do you now think makes for a good exam answer/assignment/essay/presentation?

现在你对于合格(优秀)的考试解答/作业/论文/讲演的标准是否有清楚的概念?

### *Section E. Dissertation/Project/Report*

#### *毕业论文/项目/报告的辅导*

1. What are the focuses of your dissertation/project? How did you decide?

你毕业论文/设计的题目是什么? 你是如何选定的?

2. What is the methodology you are planning to employ in the research? (lab OR lib?)

你是用何种方法开展研究的?

3. What is the guidance you received from dissertation? (written? Oral?)

获取的指导是什么? 形式是什么? (书面或口头?)

4. How was your supervisor chosen?

你的导师是如何选定的?

5. What is the pattern of supervision? (How often? Ways of supervision?)

毕业论文/毕业项目/毕业报告的辅导行式是什么样的？

6. What happens in your supervision? (describe the supervision)

辅导行为是什么样子的？

7. Now you are at the dissertation stage of Master's programme, what changes do you find? What do you do as a student in this stage? What changes do you think on time-management? How do you find doing the dissertation and supervision sessions in English? What the differences between teaching staff-student relationships in the course module and supervisor-student relationships in the supervision? What relationship do you like?

现在你已处于做毕业论文阶段，你有没有发现和以前的课程学习有什么不同？作为学生，在这一阶段你做了什么？在管理实践上，你认为有什么不同么？在做毕业论文和辅导中，你觉得用英语学习怎么样？在授课过程中的师生关系和毕业论文辅导中的导师学生关系，你觉得有什么不同？你喜欢哪种关系？

8. What has it been the most rewarding and challenging in doing the dissertation for you as a learner?

作为一个学习者，在做毕业论文中你发现有哪些有挑战和有价值之处么？

#### *Section F. Closing questions*

1. Has it any other teaching-learning experience in the UK that surprises you?

在教科和学习生活中，（还）有没有经历或者现象让你觉得意外或者不一样的地方？

(If YES, in what way, have you been surprised? Why?)

(If YES, 哪些方面让你感到意外，为什么？)

2. If someone was thinking of studying for a master programme, would you recommend your programme to them?

(if YES, why? If No, why?)

如果有即将来英的硕士留学生，你会建议他们读你所学的学科或专业么？

(YES/NO, why?)

#### **Appendix 4. Informed Consent Form**

##### INFORMED CONSENT FORM:

[Cross-cultural Transitions in Learning Experiences and Study Approaches at Master's Level]

Please read the following and sign it if you agree with what it says.

I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the research project on the topic of [Cross-cultural Transitions in Learning Experiences and Study Approaches at Master's Level] to be conducted by [Wei Zhao] as investigator, who is an postgraduate student in the Moray House School of Education at Edinburgh University. The broad goal of this research study is to explore [the experience of Chinese students studying in the UK].

I have been told that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I also understand that if at any time during the [interview/survey] I feel unable or unwilling to continue, I am free to leave. That is, my participation in this study is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw from it at any time without negative consequences. [In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.] My name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in any report subsequently produced by the researcher.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the interview/survey/procedure, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been informed that if I have any general questions about this project, I should feel free to contact [Wei Zhao] at [phone number/email address].

I have read and understand the above and consent to participate in this study. My signature is not a waiver of any legal rights. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to keep a copy of the informed consent form for my records.

Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix 5. A Sample of Signed Receipts for Payments**

Money Received (4 pounds)	Date of Receipt	Signature	Money Received (8 pounds)	Date of Receipt	Signature
4 pounds	01/01/2010	[Signature]	8 pounds	02/06/2010	[Signature]
4 pounds	2/2/2010	[Signature]	8 pounds	12/16/2010	[Signature]
4 pounds	06/02/2010	[Signature]	8 pounds	14/06/2010	[Signature]
4 pounds	06/2/2010	[Signature]	8 pounds	18/06/2010	[Signature]
4 pounds	07/2/2010	[Signature]	8 pounds	15/06/2010	[Signature]
4 pounds	07/2/2010	[Signature]	8 pounds	18/06/2010	[Signature]
4 pounds	02/02/2010	[Signature]	8 pounds	05/07/2010	[Signature]
4 pounds	07/02/2010	[Signature]	8 pounds	11/07/2010	[Signature]
4 pounds	07/02/2010	[Signature]	8 pounds	16/07/2010	[Signature]

A. 15 9250111  
 Mrs. Dominica (905)  
 @ Home car  
 no 2707699227



## Appendix 6. The Poster for Recruiting Interview Participants



### Hi my dear all Chinese master's students,

Welcome you to be one of students at Edinburgh University. I am a PhD student who intends to investigate the experience of how Chinese overseas master's students transmit during their one-year study. Now I am looking for you, who are interested in my research, to help me to know what you are thinking about your overseas experience. If you want to make a friend or just to find a good listener, I am the one who you can share with your unique experience or personal feelings. Your helps would really important to my research. During this project, you are offered a chance to get helps to get a better accommodation in UK, both in daily and academic life. And also you would really enjoy the valuable experience to be involved in my project.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or visit me, if you are interested in my research or just want to make friends. Hope I can see you very soon.

Wei Zhao

PhD student in Education, the University of Edinburgh

ivyzaow@gmail.com

M1 Paterson's Land, the Moray House School of Education

### Hi 我亲爱的来自中国的硕士生们，

欢迎来到爱丁堡大学并成为其中的一员。我是一位来自中国的在读博士生，所研究的课题方向是关于中国留学生在英国教学环境影响下的转变。现在，我正努力寻求对此课题感兴趣的你来加入我的研究项目。你对于所正经历的留学生的看法与体会将对我的研究项目起着至关重要的作用。如果你希望结识新的同龄朋友或者想找人倾诉，我将是你信赖的朋友与聆听者。你的帮助将会对我、我的研究及以后的中国留学生的海外留学生活有着及其重要的影响。我诚恳地邀请你的加入。如果你加入了此项目，除了可以享受这份宝贵的参与爱丁堡大学研究的经验，也可以得到很多帮助以适应在爱丁堡的生活和学习。

如果你对此研究感兴趣或想结交新朋友，请随时和我联系或来我办公室做客。诚挚地希望能在不久的将来认识你。

赵薇

爱丁堡大学教育学在读博士生

ivyzaow@gmail.com

M1 Paterson's Land, the Moray House School of Education

## Appendix 7. Questionnaire Schedule

### Questionnaire to 09/10 Chinese Master's Students

*Thanks for your support and participation. This questionnaire aims to know learning transitions and changes of Chinese 09/10 Master's students. Your data will be used in anonymous form in this research. Please tick and fill in the form in English or in Chinese.*

*感谢您对本研究的支持与参与。此问卷旨在了解爱丁堡 09/10 届硕士留学生的学习经历及转变。您所提供的任何信息都会以匿名的形式仅用于本次调查研究和以后可能的学术发表。*

*If any questions, please contact:*

*中英文回答均可。如有任何问题请联系:*

Wei Zhao, The Moray House School of Education, The University of Edinburgh

Tel: +44(0) 131 651 6695 Email: [Wei.zhao@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Wei.zhao@ed.ac.uk)

*This is the paper copy. For the online copy, please check 此为纸质问卷，网上问卷请点击*

*<https://spreadsheets.google.com/viewform?formkey=dHQwLXRrdjJ4QUQ4MnplQjFuZ0lib0E6MQ>*

#### A. 相关背景问题 Background Questions

性别 Gender

男 Male

女 Female

在爱丁堡就读的硕士科目名称 Name of your Master's programme at Edinburgh \_\_\_\_\_

在中国就读的本科科目名称 Name of your Undergraduate programme in China \_\_\_\_\_

*[Please turn over 请翻面]*

1. 在你中国本科毕业后只来英国读硕前，有无工作经验？

Between graduating in China and beginning your Master's programme at Edinburgh, did you have any work experience?

有 Yes

无 No

如有，请说明 If Yes, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

2. 在你来爱丁堡大学读硕前，有无出国留学的经历？

Before the Master's programme at Edinburgh, have you had experience of studying overseas?

有 Yes

无 No

如有，请简要说明时间、学校、所学课程名称及其学历？

If Yes, please briefly indicate what form this took? \_\_\_\_\_

*[Please turn to next page 请下页继续]*

**B. 中英大学的教与学的经历 Experiences of Learning and Teaching in China and at Edinburgh**

在下一组问题中, 请以自己个人的教与学经历出发, 反映出中英大学教学经历的相同及不同之处。In the next group of questions, I am asking you to draw on your own experiences of learning and teaching and to reflect on similarities and differences between learning and teaching in China and at Edinburgh.

教与学 teaching and learning	相同与不同? Similar or different?	(如你认为有“一定程度上不同”或者“非常不同”时, ) 请简要地说明是何种形式的不同。 (If you answered 'Somewhat different' or 'Very different'), please briefly outline what forms the differences took.	(如你认为有“一定程度上不同”或者“非常不同”时, ) 当适应这些不同时, 你认为有无挑战? How challenging have you found it adapting to the differences?	评论 Your comments
1. 授课方式上有无不同? How similar/different is it in how you have been taught?	非常相同 <input type="checkbox"/> Much the same 一定程度上不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat different 非常不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Very different		很有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Very challenging 有一定程度的挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat challenging 没有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Not challenging	
2. 在老师期待你的学习方式上, 有无不同? How similar/different is it in how you are expected to learn?	非常相同 <input type="checkbox"/> Much the same 一定程度上不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat different 非常不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Very different		很有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Very challenging 有一定程度的挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat challenging 没有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Not challenging	
3. 师生关系有无不同? How similar/different are relationships between teachers and students?	非常相同 <input type="checkbox"/> Much the same 一定程度上不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat different 非常不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Very different		很有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Very challenging 有一定程度的挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat challenging 没有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Not challenging	

[Please turn to next page 请下页继续]

<p>4. 对于学习上你所得到的辅导与支持，有无不同？ How similar/different is the guidance and support for studying that you've had?</p>	<p>非常相同 <input type="checkbox"/> Much the same 一定程度上不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat different 非常不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Very different</p>		<p>很有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Very challenging 有一定程度的挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat challenging 没有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Not challenging</p>	
<p>5. 考试方式有无不同？ How similar/different is it in how you are assessed?</p>	<p>非常相同 <input type="checkbox"/> Much the same 一定程度上不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat different 非常不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Very different</p>		<p>很有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Very challenging 有一定程度的挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat challenging 没有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Not challenging</p>	
<p>6. 在你获得的作业反馈上，有无不同？ How similar/different is the feedback you have got on your work?</p>	<p>非常相同 <input type="checkbox"/> Much the same 一定程度上不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat different 非常不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Very different</p>		<p>很有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Very challenging 有一定程度的挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat challenging 没有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Not challenging</p>	
<p>7. 在你管理时间和花费精力上，有无不同？ How similar/different is how you have managed your time and effort?</p>	<p>非常相同 <input type="checkbox"/> Much the same 一定程度上不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat different 非常不同 <input type="checkbox"/> Very different</p>		<p>很有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Very challenging 有一定程度的挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat challenging 没有挑战 <input type="checkbox"/> Not challenging</p>	

*[Please turn to next page 请下页继续]*

C. 用英语学习 Learning in English

在下一组问题中, 请比较你在硕士学科刚起始时和授课阶段结束时的英语水平。In the next group of questions, please compare the level of English between the beginning of your Master's programme and the end of its taught part.

	在 2009 年 9/10 月份硕士课程刚起始时, 和你硕士课程的英语要求相比, 你的实际英语水平...? When you started in last Sep/Oct, how well-matched was your English with the demands of your MSc programme?	在 2010 年 3/4 月份硕士授课时段结束时, 和你硕士课程的英语要求相比, 你的实际英语水平...? By the end of the taught part, how well-matched was your English with the demands of your MSc programmes?
英语听力 Listening in English	低于课程要求水平 <input type="checkbox"/> Below what was required 实际水平已能应付 <input type="checkbox"/> Good enough to cope 实际水平较高 <input type="checkbox"/> Very good	低于课程要求水平 <input type="checkbox"/> Below what was required 实际水平已能应付 <input type="checkbox"/> Good enough to cope 实际水平较高 <input type="checkbox"/> Very good
英语口语 Speaking in English	低于课程要求水平 <input type="checkbox"/> Below what was required 实际水平已能应付 <input type="checkbox"/> Good enough to cope 实际水平较高 <input type="checkbox"/> Very good	低于课程要求水平 <input type="checkbox"/> Below what was required 实际水平已能应付 <input type="checkbox"/> Good enough to cope 实际水平较高 <input type="checkbox"/> Very good
英语阅读 Reading in English	低于课程要求水平 <input type="checkbox"/> Below what was required 实际水平已能应付 <input type="checkbox"/> Good enough to cope 实际水平较高 <input type="checkbox"/> Very good	低于课程要求水平 <input type="checkbox"/> Below what was required 实际水平已能应付 <input type="checkbox"/> Good enough to cope 实际水平较高 <input type="checkbox"/> Very good
英语写作 Writing in English	低于课程要求水平 <input type="checkbox"/> Below what was required 实际水平已能应付 <input type="checkbox"/> Good enough to cope 实际水平较高 <input type="checkbox"/> Very good	低于课程要求水平 <input type="checkbox"/> Below what was required 实际水平已能应付 <input type="checkbox"/> Good enough to cope 实际水平较高 <input type="checkbox"/> Very good

*D. 最后问题 Final Questions*

1. 你认为中国留学生应该怎样做才能在爱丁堡大学学好硕士学科？

What do you think it takes for a Chinese student to do well in a Master's programme at Edinburgh?

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2. 你认为爱丁堡大学应当怎样做才能让中国留学生更好地体验在英的学习和留学生活？

What do you think Edinburgh University could do to improve the experiences of Chinese Master's students?

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3. 请填写你的姓名及常用 Your email box

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