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Cross-Cultural Integration through the Lens of Loneliness: a Study of Chinese Direct Entry Students in the United Kingdom

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Cross-Cultural Integration through the Lens of Loneliness: a Study of Chinese Direct Entry Students in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This study explores cross-cultural integration of Chinese top-up students in a UK university from the perspective of loneliness. Existing research on integration has underplayed loneliness. This study used semi-structured interviews to collect data at three key transition points during the top-up year. The findings suggest that students experienced loneliness both within and beyond their group, notwithstanding a number of reasons why they might be expected to be less lonely than other international students. Loneliness seemed to have a significant impact on cross-cultural integration, and participants were also unable to form strong bonds within their cohort of Chinese top-up students, and unable to experience healthy solitude. There are implications for the pre-departure preparation of such students, for the institutions hosting such students, and for responses to the social and emotional challenges they experience.

Keywords: cross-cultural integration, emotional loneliness, positive solitude, international students, social loneliness, top up programmes

La Integración Transcultural a través de la Lente de la Soledad: un Estudio de Estudiantes Chinos de Entrada Directa en el Reino Unido

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Resumen

Este estudio explora la integración transcultural de los estudiantes chinos en una universidad del Reino Unido desde la perspectiva de la soledad. Las investigaciones existentes sobre la integración han restado importancia a la soledad. Este estudio utilizó entrevistas semiestructuradas para recopilar datos en tres puntos de transición clave durante el año de recarga. Los resultados sugieren que los estudiantes experimentaron la soledad tanto dentro como fuera de su grupo, a pesar de una serie de razones por las que se podría esperar que estuvieran menos solos que otros estudiantes internacionales. La soledad parece tener un impacto significativo en la integración transcultural, y los participantes tampoco pudieron formar vínculos fuertes dentro de su cohorte de estudiantes chinos de nivel superior, y no pudieron experimentar una soledad saludable. Esto tiene implicaciones para la preparación previa a la partida de estos estudiantes, para las instituciones que los acogen y para las respuestas a los retos sociales y emocionales que experimentan.

Palabras clave: integración transcultural, soledad emocional, soledad positiva, estudiantes internacionales, soledad social, programas de perfeccionamiento

Cross-cultural integration of international students is one of the key topics in higher education internationalization and international student mobility literature. International students may feel lonely and isolated because of a lack of understanding and familiarity with the new country, culture, and language. In addition, they are far away from home, and may be lacking close friendships. During the Covid-19 pandemic, all in higher education – students and staff alike – have become more conscious of isolation and in many cases loneliness, and it appears as if the level of loneliness will have become worse. There has certainly been a considerable increase in concern for the emotional dimension of higher education worldwide, because students (and staff) are more likely to struggle with getting appropriate emotional support, especially international students compared with home students (Lane, 2021). This led the authors to review and reanalyse data generated prior to the pandemic, in order to see if there was already a basis – in more ‘congenial’ circumstances – for considering integration through the lens of loneliness.

Existing research has explored the integration of international students from multiple perspectives, such as psychological and/or sociocultural (Yin et al., 2021), intercultural learning (Dai & Garica, 2019; Liu & Dong, 2018), coping strategies (Krsmanovic, 2020), and student well-being (Chen et al., 2020). However, less attention has been paid to understanding the loneliness of international students. Social integration and loneliness are closely interlinked. A lack of desired level of social integration tends to lead to the feeling of loneliness, and people who are feeling lonely often find it more challenging to reintegrate into the communities (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Consequently, loneliness may have a significant impact on students’ well-being and health (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008), but also their learning effectiveness, their intercultural communication and their overall satisfaction.

This study makes a contribution to the literature by exploring the cross-cultural experiences of Chinese direct entry students in a UK institution from the perspective of loneliness, focusing on how loneliness is experienced both within the group (i.e. within a single cohort of such students) and beyond the group. The questions the study seeks to answer are:

1. How (if at all) do Chinese direct entry students in the UK experience social and emotional loneliness?
2. How do the experiences of loneliness relate to learning?

The term ‘Chinese direct entry students’ here refers to those who have studied a three-year programme in China and gained either a Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)/Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) higher national diploma (HND), an equivalent qualification, or agreed number of credits in a Chinese institution, and then transfer to study directly onto the final year of an undergraduate programme in a partner institution in Britain to gain a bachelor’s degree (Barber & Breeze, 2015).

Cross-Cultural Integration and Chinese Students

Cross-cultural integration is a process of getting familiar with local culture and customs during which individuals adjust to living and functioning in a new culture (Merola et al., 2019), and is comprised of three areas: academic integration (education), social integration (the intercultural, health and wellbeing) and structural integration (within an organization). This study starts from a concern with social integration, but issues related to their educational experience, and organizational responses, are also discussed (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019)

Research shows that it is normally much harder for Chinese students to integrate with the local western cultures, compared to western international students (Li & Zizzi, 2017). For the majority of Chinese students, studying abroad is the first time that they have a proper contact with western culture and customs. Many aspects, such as food and eating habits, queuing habits, and drinking culture, are significantly different between the East and West (Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Many Chinese students therefore tend to suffer culture shock, a negative impact of cultural differences on their daily life and studies, after the initial excitement of being in a new environment is fading away. Language barriers difficulties socializing with locals have often worsened the situation. Consequently, Chinese students find it very challenging to integrate into the local communities (Jiang et al., 2018). The maladjustment can then have a major impact on their health and well-being (Daddow et al., 2020). However, for this study, we explored the integration of Chinese students who had been actively prepared for study abroad by their home institutions, and who formed a cohort in the UK made up of students who already knew each other in China. Integration problems might therefore have been *less* likely with this cohort than with other international students.

Social and Emotional Loneliness

The theoretical foundation of this study is the theory of loneliness developed by Weiss (1973). Weiss focuses on understanding what individuals manage to gain from their relationships with others and views loneliness as “perceived social isolation” (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012; DiTommaso & Spinner, 1997). He claims that individuals are likely to feel lonely when there is a lack of a desired level of social interactions and closeness with others in the community, conditions that include both social and emotional/personal aspects (Weiss, 1973). Social loneliness relates to the number of social contacts (DiTommaso & Spinner, 1997), whilst emotional loneliness is concerned with the quality of one’s contacts, that is, whether a person has others to whom he or she is emotionally attached (Margalit, 2010). Either form of loneliness can potentially lead to serious mental illness. To ameliorate loneliness, individuals may need to develop and maintain different types of social relationships (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014), and/or to develop more healthy solitude practices and experiences (Stern, 2014b).

Loneliness involves suffering and is often associated with other negative conditions such as distress, anxiety, depression and sadness (Margalit, 2010, p.13). It also overlaps with social isolation – an objective state of a lack of social interactions (Berg & Cassells, 1990). Both loneliness and social isolation are commonly experienced when individuals are in a new and strange environment, but loneliness is highly contextual, and may mean different things to different people at different life stages (Weiss, 1973). Research on loneliness seems focused on individuals (i.e. the micro-level) (Larson, as cited in Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999, pp. 244-262) and on whole populations (i.e. epidemiological or large-scale sociological studies at the macro-level) (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Little attention has been given to the meso-level, such as the apparently closely-connected group of international students exemplified by Chinese direct entry students in the UK.

Loneliness and International Direct Entry Students

There is strong evidence that international students experience loneliness during the process of cross-cultural adjustment in different host countries. In fact, loneliness is considered as an important indicator of psychological

depression of international students in their adaptation. Wawera and MacCamley (2020) suggested that international students who sought less support through international student support services while they were studying in the UK tended to feel more lonely. Neto (2021) found that financial challenges, perceived discrimination, and cultural adaptability predicted loneliness experienced by international students in Portugal. Maleku and colleagues (2022) discovered that higher level of loneliness was likely to lead to higher level of anxiety among international students in the US.

Other studies emphasized the coping mechanisms of international students for loneliness. For example, Janta et al. (2012) reported the following tactics adopted by international doctoral students: social interactions with their peers, seeking professional development opportunities, and engrossing in hobbies. A qualitative interview study carried out by Vasileiou et al. (2019) discovered that the international students in the UK tend to use coping strategies, such as comfort seeking, hiding negative emotions, self-comforting, and engaging in sports and leisure activities, to deal with loneliness.

In addition, some studies focused on the international students from particular origins, such as African students in Portugal, and French students in Australia (Patron, 2014; Neto 2021), whilst others consider all international students as homogeneous, regardless of the level of their studies, the length of their programmes, their origin, background and age (Wawera & McCamley, 2020; Jiang et al, 2018; Janta et al., 2012).

However, none of the studies on loneliness has given attention to Chinese direct entry students in the UK. They are different from other international students, and have some differentiating features. Therefore, they are possibly the least likely to exhibit loneliness. For example, they are often older than year one international students, and closely-connected, as they have to study in their home institution in China for three years first, and tend to come to study in the same UK institutions together. They then normally have people with whom they are familiar (who may be their friends) with them when they arrive in the UK. In addition, while they are in China, they usually receive some pre-departure training and support relating to British education system and culture, which may be expected to help reduce loneliness.

Learning Together and Alone

Independent learning is considered one of the most important skills that university students, including international students, need to possess when studying in the UK (Cottrell, 2013). This is because UK universities commonly adopt a more learner centred learning and teaching approach. Rooted in constructivism, this approach aims to help students develop into independent learners by supporting them to actively construct their knowledge and understanding through doing and experiencing (Lak et al., 2017). According to the results of the recent student academic experience surveys (2017-2019), students on Business and Administrative studies on average spent a similar amount of time on timetabled tutor led sessions and independent studies (10 hours vs 11 hours) (Neves & Hillman, 2017; 2018; 2019). Compared with year one and two students, the expectations of independent learning for final year undergraduate students are much higher, since they are required to produce their dissertation or project. Academic supervisors do provide guidance and support, but students are given more autonomy to decide on their research topic and content, and manage their writing and research time (Healey et al., 2013). However, it is worth pointing out that even though independent learning does not necessary mean learning on their own, students need to spend a significant amount of time alone to plan, manage and assess their own learning.

In comparison, Chinese students are taught predominantly in a more teacher-centred teaching environment. They do not appear to have control over their learning activities, and are more used to taking orders and following tutors' instructions. Consequently, they tend to spend much more time in classroom settings than British students. A study conducted by Chinese researchers (Yin et al., 2014) shows that the timetabled teaching hours for Chinese undergraduate students in China vary between 16 to 30 hours per week. Therefore, they have much less time to study independently. Some students reported that they spent as little as 4 to 5 hours on independent learning, outside the classroom (Zhao, 2015).

Methods

About the Top-Up Programmes in the UK

Top-up programmes are a type of undergraduate programme provided by UK universities, and is designed for international students who have completed either an SQA (Scottish Qualifications Authority)/BTEC (the Business and Technology Education Council) HND (Higher National Diploma), an equivalent qualification or agreed number of credits in their home institution to transfer to study directly onto the final year of an undergraduate programme in a partner institution in the UK to gain a bachelor's degree. The duration of this type of programme is one year (HEFCE, 2015).

With regards to this study, the participants came to the UK university to study a one-year Business related top up programme. They were however required to arrive in the UK earlier during the summer holiday to undertake a pre-sessional language course first, prior to the start of their top up programme. Based on the result of their IELTS exam, the length of the language course varied between 15 weeks to 5 weeks.

Before coming to Britain, the participants had studied either a HND or an equivalent international programme in their home institution in China for three years. The first year of both programmes appeared to be dedicated specifically to language training, and the second and final year were focused on the subject related modules. Students on these programmes were also provided with some pre-departure academic and social support in the areas such as academic writing, undergraduate degree classification, admissions, and student accommodation. Three Chinese institutions had an articulation partnership with the UK institution, which allowed participants to come over to Britain to study a top up programme after completing their studies in China.

Participants

The sample size of this study was 12. The participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and opportunity sampling. The sample population was felt conveniently accessible because the researcher and the Chinese direct entry students were from the same academic school. The researcher also used an opportunity sampling technique because the Chinese

direct entry students arrived at this UK institution at different times during the summer to attend their pre-sessional language course. Among all participants, 33% of them were male, and 67% of them were female. The detailed profiles of participants are listed in the table below.

Table 1.
Respondent profile

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Programme and subject studied in China
Alan	20	M	HND programme in Financial Services
Alex	20	F	International programme in Finance
Amanda	21	F	International programme in Finance
Daniel	20	M	HND programme in Accounting
David	19	M	International programme in Finance
Harry	20	M	HND programme in Business Management
Jane	20	F	International programme in Business Management
Laura	20	F	International programme in Hotel management
Lisa	20	F	HND programme in Financial Services
Michelle	19	F	HND programme in Accounting
Rachel	20	F	HND programme in Accounting
Sophie	19	F	International programme in Business Trade

Data Collection and Analysis

This was a longitudinal study. The main focus of this type of study is “continuity”, also “progress and change in status (Rajulton, 2001:170)”. For this reason, data were collected using semi-structured one to one interviews, aiming to gain a nuanced understanding of their personal views throughout their study time in the UK institution. The first set of interviews was conducted at the moving in stage, which refers to the period between their arrival and the completion of their pre-sessional language course. The second set of interviews took place at the moving through stage, which includes the

period between the start of their top up programme to the end of their first semester. The final set of interviews occurred at the moving out stage, which includes the period between the start of their second semester to the end of their top up programme.

Questions asked at the moving in stage largely focused on gaining background information, that is, the previous experiences of Chinese direct entry students in their home institution in China. The moving through and moving out interview questions explored the challenges they were facing and how the 112 participants dealt with the academic and social situation they were in when they were half way through and at the end of the journey. A section of the pre-defined questions is listed in the table below.

Table 2.
Sample interview questions

Transitions stage	Interview questions
Moving in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now you have arrived in the UK for over a week, how do you feel? • What are your main worries at present? And how are you going to manage them? • What are your expectations of this one-year top-up programme? • What is your English level (e.g., listening, speaking, reading and writing)?
Moving through	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now you are halfway through the top-up programme, how do you feel? • What are the main challenges you are facing at present in relation to your academic and social development? • What are your main worries? • Do you have any difficulties dealing with non-Chinese students, both inside and outside the classroom? (if so, what are they? if not, describe how you are dealing with them)
Moving out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now you have almost completed your top-up programme, is your overall experience in this UK institution positive or disappointing? • What have been the main challenges and difficulties you face during this academic year? • How did you deal with them? And have you sorted them out yet? • How are you getting on with the home and other non-Chinese students in the second semester?

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Permission was asked and granted each time, to allow the researcher to record the interview with a digital voice recorder. Because one of the researchers is also Chinese, and shares the same cultural background as the participants, all interviews were conducted in (Mandarin) Chinese, so that the participants could easily

express what they wanted to say. This also created a more relaxed atmosphere for the participants.

The data were analysed in three cycles. The first cycle coding started as soon as the transcriptions was completed at each transition stage, identifying the key areas emerging in the interview transcripts (Bengtsson, 2016). The second cycle involved developing themes that helped with understanding of the key story the data were evidencing across the moving in, moving through and moving out stages (Miles et al., 2014). An interesting and unexpected theme emerging from the first two cycles was loneliness. The data suggest that the participants by and large experienced some or all elements of loneliness¹ (Stern, 2014b), such as being on their own (*I didn't get to see others often as everyone stays in their own room and doesn't come out*); feeling rejected (*I tried to join the conversations during the group discussions, but the British students didn't want to speak with me*); and self-blaming and feeling guilt (*I often feel that I would be a burden and bring trouble to others if I talked to them about my problems*). A third cycle of coding was therefore carried out on the final agreed transcripts across all three transition stages (36 transcripts in total), to identify specifically the themes in relation to loneliness.

Results

Experience of Loneliness at Different Transition Stage

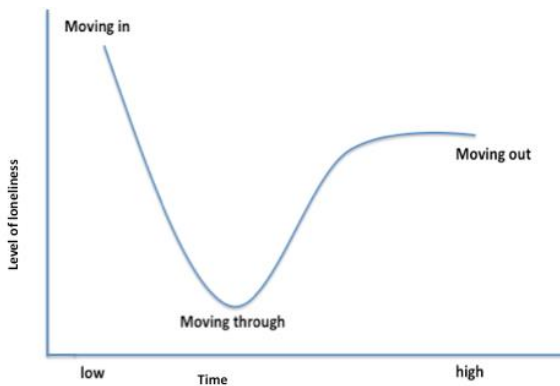


Figure 1. The transition pattern of the participants

As shown in the figure above (fig.1), at the moving in stage, almost all participants reported that they enjoyed their pre-sessional language course, and hardly experienced either social or emotional loneliness during this short period of time (between 5 to 15 weeks). This could be because the setting and delivery of the language course was very similar to what they had experienced in China.

We were timetabled to attend teaching sessions throughout the day. All of us [were in the same class] and spent time together learning and practicing English. Our tutor was giving us plenty support, and she was always around [in the classroom] (Amanda).

I managed to get to know other Chinese direct entry students quickly, because we were in the same class all the time (Jane).

However, 11 out of 12 participants said that they started experiencing social loneliness at the moving through stage (e.g., soon after the start of their programme). This was mainly because they were having trouble in developing new friendships with students of other nationalities. They reported that they didn't really know what to do and how to do to break the ice since they believed that there were fewer opportunities for them to do so.

It is such a strange feeling. I am living in Britain and surrounded by British people. However, I am unable to make any British friends (Laura).

Nevertheless, it appears that the participants by and large (9 out of 11) experienced more emotional than social loneliness between the mid to the end of their first semester. It was partially because they felt that the top up programme was much more challenging and demanding than the pre-sessional language course in the areas such as learning autonomy, assessment pressure and intensity, and the depth of subject knowledge. In addition, these students felt that they were less supported and cared by their British tutors compared to their experience in China. Consequently, they started developing worries and concerns.

In my opinion, there isn't enough support. I don't think the University cares about us - the Chinese direct entry students. They

don't really check on our progress, and don't give us the help we need for our assignments (Harry).

We have so many assignments to complete, and the deadlines are all very close to each other. I feel that I don't have time to sleep, to eat, or even to wash my hair. I have to use all my time to work on my assignments (Alex).

At the moving out stage, participants reported that they continued experiencing both forms of loneliness, but to a lesser extent, compared with the moving through stage. Even though the academic and social situation they were in remained pretty much the same, 10 out of 12 participants said that they were feeling better in the second semester, because they felt that they had gained some experiences in the first semester. Besides, most of them commented that they were not worried about making new friends anymore, due to the short duration of their programme.

In my opinion, it isn't worth the effort anymore since I only stay in this city for a year. (Daniel)

I prefer to know more Chinese instead of British students. Because I only stay in Britain for a very limited period of time and will go back home soon. (Lisa)

Out-Group Social Loneliness

Participants seemed to have encountered social loneliness throughout this one-year study journey. They felt that it was very difficult to get to know and make new friends with home students and they were much less supported and cared by their tutors in the UK. Consequently, they reported that they were unable to integrate into the new social and academic environment properly.

I don't have any local friends. I do eat out and go to pubs sometimes, but it is always with other Chinese students. I have never been out with any British. (Alan)

As shown in the table below (table 3), the causes identified for out-group social loneliness can be grouped into two areas: social and academic.

Table 3.

Causes to out-group social loneliness

Social	Different cultural and social norms between China and the UK Lacking dedicated social activities Language barriers
Academic	Lacking Chinese style hand held assessment support/ too much learning autonomy Having little opportunity to work with non-Chinese students

Socially the majority of participants reported that the different cultural and social norms between China and Britain made it difficult for them to make new British friends. Over half of the participants also believed that the UK institution did not provide dedicated social activities and events to help Chinese direct entry students get to know non-Chinese students, outside the classroom. Meanwhile, 7 out of 12 participants mentioned the impact of language barrier on their communications with non-Chinese students.

British seem to laugh a lot when they have conversations. But I don't think what they say funny at all. Many times, I have to force myself to laugh (Amanda)

I have friends who are studying in other UK universities, and they have had many interesting activities, such as playing table tennis together, and students of different nationalities cooking together. Why don't we have activities like those ones? (Laura)

Academically, participants commented mainly on the academic arrangement of their top up programmes and the associated learning and teaching style. For example, almost all of them felt that they were expected to think for themselves, and take more much control of their learning activities inside and outside the classroom. However, they said that they did not like the high scale of learning autonomy assigned to them, and would have preferred their tutors to be involved much more in their learning

process, and provide more support on a daily basis. 8 out of 12 participants also felt that there were not enough timetabled teaching and support sessions.

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

In second semester, I am timetabled to attend only three hours' classes in total. I really want to have more classes, so that I can get more and better support from my tutors every day (David).

In addition, participants said that they were allocated in classes purposely with mainly fellow Chinese students, and hence did not have many opportunities to get to know British students. Occasionally when they (3 out of 12 participants) had a chance to do group activities with British students, they felt that they were not fully taken in as part of the group, possibly due to language and cultural barriers.

Once I was allocated to do a group discussion with three British students. I tried to join in the conversation, but they did not seem to want to involve me [in the discussions]. Besides, they were talking too fast, I could only understand a small part of the conversations (Rachel).

The experiences of this group of Chinese direct entry students seem to reflect the characteristics of what Margalit (2010) refers to as 'social loneliness', that is, 'the lack of satisfactory connections and belonging to desired social groups, such as networks of friends' (Margalit, 2010, p.6). Margalit also argues that when they are suffering social loneliness, individuals are more eager to be accepted into an existing social group. The findings seem to support this view. Around 50% of participants also reported that they did not want to be feeling lonely, but did not know how to break down social barriers, and how to start building a local network.

It may be very challenging to become very close friends with them. However, I would like to try to get to know non-Chinese students and become normal friends with them. (Michelle)

I am living in Britain and am surrounded by British people. However, I don't know any of them. Is there any way for me to become friends with them? (Harry)

In-Group Emotional Loneliness

It seems that participants in this study socialised predominately with their compatriots. However, surprisingly, they reported that they experienced mainly emotional loneliness (Margalit, 2010; Weiss 1973) *within* their enclosed community, notwithstanding many having known each other for several years in China. Participants by and large reported that neither they nor their friends shared their true feelings with each other. 7 out of 12 participants also said that although they came to know other Chinese direct entry students on campus, they considered these new social connections merely acquaintances or casual friendships, meaning they are okay to hang out with but with no desire to get to know them better.

When I am feeling low or experiencing study problems and difficulties in life, I don't tend to turn to my friends, including my close friends for help. I just deal with them myself. ... This is very different from how I dealt with things at home. I could not keep any secrets or things to myself, I always had to share with my friends. (Alex)

Their reactions seemed to be caused by a combination of internal and external factors. (see table 4 below). Internal factors include personal pride and a worry of losing their friends. 5 participants mentioned that they did not want their friends to think that they were 'weak' and incapable of solving their own problems. 6 participants also commented that they were anxious that they would lose their close friends and became even more lonely in Britain.

I don't really talk about my feelings to my best friends.... If I share too many negative feelings with them regularly, I may lose my friends, since nobody likes others to moan to them too much. (Jane)

Everyone has his or her own problems to deal with. One has to learn to grow up and to be independent! (Lisa)

Dealing with problems ‘myself’ could also suggest the participants were growing in their maturity, as emerging adults (Arnett, 2004), due to the influence of their surrounding contexts, such as the compressed nature of top up programmes and being driven to a greater independence², yet significant loneliness accompanied such experiences.

Table 4.

The causes to in-group emotional loneliness

Internal factors	Personal pride A worry of losing friends
External factors	Intense academic pressure Difficulty in joining an existing group of friends Lacking appropriate social opportunities

External factors include intense academic pressure associated with the top up programmes, the potential difficulty in joining existing groups of well-established friends, and also a lack of appropriate social opportunities. Unlike those studying an entire undergraduate degree abroad, Chinese direct entry students were expected to not only adjust to the new environment rapidly in a short period time, but more importantly to improve themselves significantly to meet the high expectations of the most advanced year in an undergraduate study in the UK. Consequently, all of them reported that they had to put their study and dealing with intensive academic pressure and challenges, rather than developing friendships as the priority. Among participants, 5 out of 12 participants also said that they did not want to make the effort anyway. This is because many friendships had been developed prior to leaving China, and they perceived that it was very difficult to join an existing group of friends. Furthermore, 5 participants commented that the entertainment activities provided by the university were not suitable for Chinese students, and hence did not attract them to attend.

Studying at the final year level proves to be very challenging for me. All my energy has been put on studying, and doing my coursework.

... I don't really have any energy and time left to think about new friendships (Sophie).

It is not difficult for us to get to know other Chinese students, and most of us are friendly to each other. However, it is highly difficult for us to become close friends, since when we came to Britain, most of us already had our own group of friends (Laura).

Apart from showing the evidence of emotional and social loneliness, the data also suggest that almost all participants seemed to be surprised that they felt so lonely, in spite of the fact that they were with a group of friends in the UK.

This is not what I had expected. I never thought that it would be so hard for me to make [Chinese] friends. I have so many close friends at home, and regularly go out with at least a group of them. But here in Britain, I only have one or two [close friends] (Lisa).

Discussion

This study adopted the theory of loneliness (Weiss, 1973) as the theoretical foundation to explore the cross-cultural transition experience of a group of Chinese direct entry students studying in a UK university. The findings reveal that the participants were suffering from what Weiss described as “*social* loneliness” at the meso level (of and beyond the group), and *emotional* loneliness at the micro level (the individual level). They were having difficulties in socializing and forming friendships with the domestic students. In addition, a number of aspects of their situation, such as the pre-departure support and coming to the UK as a group, that might have been expected to have helped reduce the feeling of loneliness, did not seem to work as expected.

The findings make the following contributions to the literature. Firstly, evidence of out-group social loneliness seems to support what has already been identified in the literature. It has been well documented that international students, including Chinese students feel lonely and can not easily become part of a local community when studying abroad, because they find it very hard to make friends with domestic students (Jiang et al., 2018). The social causes identified in the study, such as language, social and culture

barriers are in line with the findings of previous studies (Newsome & Cooper, 2016).

Secondly, the findings raise concern over the in-group loneliness experienced by the Chinese direct entry students. They were not developing strong friendships and were lonely even amongst those with whom they had social, language and cultural connections. Such evidence was not expected by the authors. This is not only because the Chinese direct entry students seemed to have remained in a close group throughout their time in the UK, more importantly, they had already established social ties within the group before travelling to the UK. Apart from the factors relating to their personal characteristics, their in-group emotional loneliness seemed to be caused by their surrounding contexts, and also the specific features of the top up programmes. For instance, Chinese direct entry students chose to put most of their energy into studies, in order to cope with the academic pressure caused by the compressed nature of their top up programme. Many of them also felt that it was unnecessary to make the same level of effort to integrate as to succeed academically, as they would only stay in Britain for a short period of time.

And finally, this study is distinctive in exploring the impact of academic barriers, in particular, the difficulties of learning independently, on social loneliness, since the authors found out that their social loneliness was also caused by a number of factors relating to the academic settings of their top up programme. For example, Chinese direct entry students felt that they were put in an unexpected situation, that is, learning independently at most of time, and had to take greater ownership and control of their studies. This new learning style was very different from what they had experienced in their home institution in China, as they were more used to tutor led classroom based community learning (Zhang, 2015).

Meanwhile, they reported that they were not informed about the level of independent learning expected, and the related training was not provided before their departure either. Even though they were learning together and working regularly with fellow Chinese students, the Chinese direct entry students reported that they had much less opportunities to do so with non-Chinese students. As the result, they felt that they could not fully understand and adjust properly to the new academic environment and system.

Independent learning often involves spending a large amount of alone time planning learning activities, preparing for classes, reflecting and

evaluating individuals' learning effectiveness, although it does not necessarily mean working on one's own. Existing research (Nguyen et al., 2017; Long & Averill, 2013) shows that spending and enjoying some quality time alone can help boost creativity and productivity, and also improve one's well being, as it helps adjust emotions and prepare individuals for better social engagement with others. Therefore, seeking positive solitude and making effective use of alone time may potentially help the Chinese direct entry students enhance their academic performance in this more learner centred learning environment.

Consequently, the sending and receiving institutions perhaps should consider to provide dictated training, support and guidance in this area to Chinese direct entry students before and after they arrive in Britain. Further research is also needed to explore whether the similar correlation between social loneliness and difficulties of learning independently identified in the study are reported by other international direct entry students, and also whether the training and support on developing positive solitude helps improve their learning effectiveness.

Conclusion

This research shed light on understanding the feeling of international students' loneliness while they study abroad. Loneliness was described by all participants in this research. Using the lens of loneliness to explore the experience of this group of students is a valuable – and novel way to understand the students and how they might best be supported by institutions. The overarching findings from the study are: 1) one of the main causes of their social loneliness was the academic barriers they were experiencing during their one-year study in the UK, in particular their difficulties in coping with the high scale of independent learning; and 2) this group of students also experienced *emotional* loneliness in spite of the fact that they already had an established group of friends when coming to the UK.

There were several reasons for their experience of loneliness, very specific to the context of the group and the top up programmes they were studying. But there are wider implications for student support in many different contexts. This approach to researching the experience of loneliness may help illuminate experiences of individuals (i.e. the findings of micro-level studies) and the findings of large-scale cultural studies (i.e. the findings

of macro-level research) by adding the possibility of in-depth exploration of group contexts (i.e. the meso-level factors). Loneliness is not experienced uniformly, and meso-level studies help explain how different forms of loneliness may be exacerbated or mitigated, including through forms of social engagement but also educational approaches that might provide better opportunities for healthy (and 'studious') solitude.

Notes

¹ The Chinese words appeared in the interview transcripts which can be translated directly as the meaning of loneliness: 孤独 (gudu), 寂寞 (jimo), 孤单 (gudan).

² Ways in which loneliness – although itself a negative emotion – may act as a stimulus to other activity, to creativity or greater independence, are described in the therapeutic literature (Moustakas & Moustakas 2004).

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