Chinese undergraduate students’ academic coping and approaches to studying in the UK—a longitudinal study of four individual cases

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Abstract

This longitudinal qualitative study focuses on how four self-financed Chinese undergraduate students coped with their academic learning in a UK university. While there has been abundant literature on the academic difficulties and learning strategies of Chinese international students in English-speaking countries, mostly of it treats Chinese students as a cultural group, following a ‘large culture’ view. By contrast, this research aims to explore the factors that contribute to the variations among individuals during the dynamic interactions between their individual, cultural and educational elements, which represents a ‘small culture’ view.

Based on the data collected mainly through semi-structured interviews and class observations, triangulated by academic transcripts and teacher feedback, the thesis presents each case through ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973). With reference to the existing research into culture, mindset, goal and self-efficacy theory, as well as academic coping and approaches to learning, this exploratory study contributes to the current literature in a number of specific ways.

It is the first study to associate international students’ learning with their mindsets and self-efficacy. It identifies that Chinese students’ social goals can be both a source of motivation and pressure. Social goals can motivate students with a growth mindset to maintain their academic self-efficacy and adopt adaptive coping strategies, leading to positive learning outcomes. By contrast, social goals may pressurise those holding a fixed mindset to adopt maladaptive coping, in particular, problem-avoidance coping strategies, and in extreme cases, academic cheating, which further results in their dissatisfaction and disintegration.

The research provides new insights into the impact of mindsets on Chinese students’ achievement goals, mediated by their specific cultural experience and the new learning environment. There appears to be a more complex relationship than the existing work on mindsets would lead us to believe between students’ mindsets and their learning outcomes. For these Chinese students at least, a growth mindset provides the necessary condition for learning goals to take place, but it may not be always sufficient. This seems to contradict the previous literature that a growth mindset is associated with learning goals. Similarly, while a fixed mindset can lead to a performance goal, which also confirms the existing literature. However, the study also finds that a surface learning approach does not always coincide with a fixed mindset. The teaching and learning environment may mediate the relationships between mindsets and learning behaviour.

Students’ cultural values and beliefs, and their predominant mindsets formed during their socialisations may continue to influence their academic coping in the UK. However, these are also fluid constructs, which means that students are liable to change in a new learning environment. What is needed is to reach increase the understanding of the cultures of learning between UK universities and Chinese
students to reduce the discrepancies between them. Chinese students’ tendency to believe in effort as a route to success (a growth mindset) can be an asset for UK educators to build on. Early interventions to help Chinese students to explore and develop a range of learning strategies to increase academic self-efficacy and to integrate them into a multi-cultural learning community are likely to increase their opportunities to make positive changes towards an enjoyable learning journey.
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Acronyms

ASK: Academic Skills Unit
BC2: Business Communication 2
BC3: Business Communication 3
CET: College English Test
CLT: Communicative Language Teaching
EAP: English for Academic Purposes
GL4: General Language Grade 4
GL5: General Language Grade 5
GL6: General Language Grade 6
HE: Higher Education
IELTS: International English Language Testing System
LST: Learning Support Tutor
ITBC: International Trade and Business Communication
MOE: Ministry of Education (of the People’s Republic of China)
PhD: Doctor of Philosophy
PSE: Pre-Sessional English
P1: (PSE) Programme 1
P2: (PSE) Programme 2
P3: (PSE) Programme 3
SRL: Self-Regulated Learning
TB 1: Teaching block 1
TB 2: Teaching block 2
UK: United Kingdom
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Declaration

While registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the name candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

The total word count is approximately 90,000 words, including tables and figures.
Chapter 1 Introduction

Since I started my career as an English teacher over 20 years ago, I have always been intrigued by the factors that can affect students’ learning. Like many other teachers, I used to focus on the educational factors and adjust my teaching practices. Although my efforts certainly helped improve some students, they seemed to have little influence on others. I finished teaching my last two English classes in 2012. Despite entering the university with similar entry scores, some of my students became competent language users, while others could barely express themselves in English. Such contrasts between individual students who had received similar university instructions left me wonder other important reasons might have been involved in the learning process. I was determined to identify these through a PhD study in the UK, where motivational research into students’ language learning has been well established. Also, as Chinese students have been consistently the largest group of international students in UK Higher Education (UK HE) (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2015), taking advantage of my own knowledge of education and of Chinese culture would enable me to find the answers to help Chinese students to improve their learning.

Despite the number of studies focusing on Chinese students’ learning experiences, the majority of them follow the ‘deficit’ or ‘surplus’ models based on a large culture view. Rather than considering both UK and Chinese cultures of learning, the literature tends to see Chinese students having either ‘deficit’ or ‘surplus’ features influenced by their Chinese culture, without giving full credit to the potentially mediating role of individuals’ agency in effecting changes in a new culture of learning.

This research adopts an ecological view to interpret students’ academic coping, which recognizes that this involves the complex interplays between the individual, the educational and the cultural factors. Individual factors include mainly their mindsets (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993) and their English language competence. The educational factors include the goal structure created by teaching and teacher feedback, student assessment and workload, and the university support system. Chinese culture of learning acquired from their early socialisation may continue to influence Chinese students’ learning process; however, such influences are also liable to change so that students may form new conceptions of learning.

This research will utilise rich qualitative data to explore Chinese students’ learning experiences with reference to relevant theories of education, psychology and culture. Rarely have these theories been combined to interpret the behaviour of individual Chinese learners during their transcultural learning, leaving gaps in the literature whether theories developed based largely on Western populations may apply to Chinese students. This research would be highly informative for those involved in HE sectors, including policy makers and teachers, as well as Chinese students studying in the UK. Furthermore, research on Chinese students’ learning are largely quantitative, with very few longitudinal qualitative
studies detailing changes in beliefs, behaviour and learning outcomes over time. By utilizing semi-structured interviews, triangulated by class observations, academic transcripts, and teacher feedback, this research intends to identify the subtleties of individual changes, growth and development as a result of the dynamic interaction between their individual, educational and cultural factors during their transcultural education.

The organisation of the thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 compares the two cultures of learning in China and in the UK that may influence Chinese students’ learning, and argues the need for a small culture view which allows for the focus on the variations as well as the commonalities between individuals within the same culture. Chapter 3 critically explores the relevant theories concerning academic coping and approaches to studying and identifies the gaps in the literature. Chapter 4 outlines the rationale for the research, presents the detailed procedures involved in data collection, analysis and write up, and points out possible ethical issues. Chapters 5 to 8 presents the learning journeys of four individual Chinese undergraduates who studied in a UK university for two to three years, focusing on the “what, how and why” research questions through thick description, narrative accounts and critical analysis. Chapter 9 analyses the core themes emerging across four case studies. A framework entitled ‘Chinese students’ academic coping and learning outcomes’ is constructed through comparisons and contrasts between the individuals regarding their strategy use, their changes over time, and more importantly, their predominant mindsets. Chapter 10 critically reviews the strengths and weaknesses of the research, explores areas for future investigation and provides recommendations for UK universities. A personal reflection in the end concludes my own PhD learning journey.
Chapter 2 Culture of learning

2.1 Introduction

Jin and Cortazzi (2006, p.9) defines ‘cultures of learning’ as “the taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about how to teach or learn successfully and about how to use talk in interaction”. Western teachers and Chinese students tend to hold different cultures of learning acquired from their socialisation process. Unproblematised differences about each other’s cultures of learning can “cause intercultural misunderstanding” and result in othering each other (Stanley, 2011, p.93). Chinese students and UK educators need to become aware of differing cultures of learning, but more importantly, to negotiate a way to ‘meet in the middle’ (Stanley, 2011, p.93) in order for Chinese students to succeed in their cross-cultural transition. An understanding of the fundamental differences between cultures of learning (Chinese and British) appears necessary here.

2.2 Chinese culture of learning

Chinese students presumably have formed certain conceptions about cultures of learning as a result of their cultural socialisation prior to their UK HE. These conceptions may continue to influence their learning in the UK. Both the high values attached to education (a good education is often associated with both high salaried jobs and family honour) and the comparatively limited educational resources make Chinese education extremely competitive. Consequently, Chinese parents are willing to invest in their children’s education. In order to achieve a competitive edge, an increasing number of middle class Chinese families are sending their children abroad to obtain a degree (Murphy & Johnson, 2009). However, as will be argued later, differences in the cultures of learning may also cause inconsonance between teaching and learning during their cultural transition.

2.2.1 The Components of Chinese education

As the largest education system in the world in terms of student numbers, education in China is divided into kindergarten, primary, secondary and higher education (HE), as illustrated in Table 2.1. Whereas both primary and junior high education are compulsory, kindergarten, senior high and HE are optional, and hence the different gross enrolment ratio at each level of education.

Table 2.1: Basic information about public education in China (Year 2013 figure)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Junior high</th>
<th>Senior high</th>
<th>HE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>2-6</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>13-15</td>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>19-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(year)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Colleges 2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(year)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Despite the expansion of HE in China in recent years, the stratification of Chinese universities into different tiers means that admissions to elite Chinese universities (Tier 1 and Tier 2) are still extremely competitive. Among approximately 2,000 universities in China, only 39 universities (entitled Project 985, named after the launch date in May 1985) are listed as Tier One, selected by the Government to be developed into world-class universities. 112 universities (entitled Project 211, meaning they are key public universities and disciplines in the 21st century) are Tier Two. These Tier 1 and Tier 2 elite universities receive government funding to enable them to develop research and improve teaching quality. Graduates from Tier 1 universities are much favoured by big employers (around 10% of all Chinese university graduates). By contrast, Tier 3 and Tier 4 universities, in particular the vocational and technological institutions at the provincial level, tend to be poorly staffed and under-funded, and their graduates are less favoured by the job market for lack of government support (Liu, 2013). The majority of many private institutions are also considered to be ‘Tier 3’ or ‘Tier 4’. These universities accept students with much lower scores in gaokao (the national pre-college/university examination). The inadequacy in resources means the qualities of these universities cannot be guaranteed (Ozturgut, 2011). The stratification of Chinese universities pushes Chinese middle-class families to seek alternative routes, such as going abroad, to secure a better education for their children.

2.2.2 Chinese values in education

Under the influence of its traditional culture, Chinese people tend to attach great importance to educational outcomes, which they believe they can achieve through effort. The values and beliefs attached to education are thought to motivate Chinese students to persevere in their academic studies. Students’ academic success is associated with not only their own future but also with the honour of their family, creating further social pressure and fear of failure among Chinese students.
Education has been traditionally regarded as a means to obtain knowledge, improve their moral character and achieve upward social mobility in China (Bian, 2002; Li, 2002). The great value attached can be related to Confucianism, a philosophy that has had a tremendous impact on Chinese culture for over two thousand years. As early as Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu (206 BC—220 AD), a stout Confucianist, introduced the world’s first examination system and started a tradition whereby ordinary people could be promoted to the ruling class via examinations (Chan, 1999). Although the modern Chinese examination system has evolved, some of the Confucian values and beliefs still impact Chinese education (Chan, 1999), in particular, Confucius’ idea of achieving success through effort and perseverance. According to Leung (2010), this inherit cultural belief in education means that Chinese people are less likely than their European counterparts to endorse a fixed mindset. Indeed, in their study of approximately 600 Chinese students (from primary schools, middle schools and universities), Hau and Salili (1996) found that these Chinese students tended to have strong effort attribution regarding their academic success and failure, which became more pronounced as they progressed through education. Similarly, longitudinal quantitative study into school students’ motivation in the US found that Chinese immigrants show greater academic motivation and perseverance than their European counterparts because of their socialised value for education (Fuligni, 2001).

Chinese cultural values attached to education and the competitive nature in Chinese education may help explain Chinese students’ motivation to succeed academically. However, there are concerns about the consequences from a culture of constant academic competitions. Mental and physical strains aside, many of the teaching and learning practices conflict with cognitive theories of teaching and learning, hindering the progress of individuals and society.

2.2.3 Chinese education and its repercussions

The unique traditional role of education in providing upward social mobility in Chinese society has resulted in a meritocratic system based on competition at various educational levels in China. As high marks are the sole criterion for students to achieve academic access, it is essential for Chinese students to follow a rigid curriculum and work diligently to succeed in two high-stake examinations, the pre-junior high school and the pre-senior high school examinations. Entering the limited number of elite schools maximizes their chance of success in Chinese university entrance examination, commonly known as gaokao (7th and 8th of June every year). The fierce competition of gaokao is compared to ‘a race in which thousands of soldiers and tens of thousands of horses cross a single log bridge at the same time’, suggesting the competitive nature of this high-stake exam. Gaokao scores not only determines students’ university entry but also are linked to family honour and future careers (Liu, 2013). For this reason, Chinese students tend to spend all their waking hours studying. Those living in cities tend to take extra-curricular lessons during the weekends and holidays, on which their parents spend as high as a third of their family annual income to stay competitive (Liao, 2012). However, not every student is
guaranteed successful entry to an elite university. For example, approximately 9.4 million students took gaokao in 2015, while 75% were admitted to HE of all kinds, only approximately 10% were admitted to Tier 1 universities (Shuang, 2016).

Despite public criticisms about gaokao, including its promoting cramming teaching, encouraging rote learning and limiting creativity, all of which hinder the development of individuals and the nation (Dello-Iacovo, 2009), gaokao and its associated teaching and learning practices persist in Chinese education today. To address this problem, policies and regulations have been issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE), which forbid teachers from charging students for extra-curriculum lessons, grant more autonomy to schools and local governments, and allow some universities to recruit a certain percentage of students with special gifts and talents without the constraint of gaokao scores. A curriculum reform started in 2001 with a clear focus on student-centred education aiming to orient the examination-oriented education towards ‘quality education’ in order to develop well-rounded individuals with creativity and practical skills (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Peng et al., 2014).

The effect of the reform to alleviate students’ academic burden appears to be uneven across different economic development areas in China. First, a lack of adequate qualified teach poses serious challenges to implement the new curriculum in rural western regions in China (Peng et al., 2014). Second, teachers at secondary schools, pressurised by the fact that their teaching and salary can be tied to their students’ examination scores, continue focusing on drilling their students on content known to be on a test. Although students’ test scores may show significant improvement after relentless drilling, such scores “do not necessarily translate into corresponding knowledge and skills” (Liu & Neilson, 2011, p.508). Last, Chinese parents’ persistence in having their children take extracurricular lessons also makes reducing students’ academic burden difficult to achieve. Many fear that if their children relax themselves, they may fall behind others and lose their competitive edge in gaokao. Consequently, “examinations and rote learning still dominate Chinese schooling and examination-oriented competition appears to be increasing rather than decreasing” (Dello-Iacovo, 2009, p.248). Despite an effort to move towards a social constructionist model, where learning is constructing knowledge through social interactions, Chinese education in secondary schools still features a behaviouristic model, where learning is conceptualised as accumulating facts and information (Shepard, 2008). The repercussions of secondary education continues to influence HE in China.

2.2.4 Teaching and learning in Chinese Higher Education

Many factors contribute to a dominant surface approaches to learning among Chinese university students, indicated by their lack of study skills to enable deep learning at undergraduate levels (Yin, Lu, & Wang, 2014). The fact that many borderline students are recruited into undergraduate level based on relentless drills on examination preparation also contributes to this. Research suggests that although borderline students are “among the least skilled in the entire applicant pool….they) have the most to
gain from exam preparation, and so they do the most of it, neglecting real learning in the process” (Liu & Neilson, 2011, p. 513).

Furthermore, as with the reform at the secondary level, the Government’s effort to improve undergraduate teaching quality through the national teaching evaluation of universities under the supervision of the MOE does not appear to be effective. Some researchers claim that the evaluation process veers more towards the ‘macro issues’ such as university facilities and equipment rather than focusing on the ‘micro issues’, such as how teachers teach and how students learn (Lee, Huang, & Zhong, 2012). Consequently, the absence of creativity and deep learning at the university remains unresolved. An example can be seen in English education in China.

Listed as one of the three core subjects tested in gaokao (the other two are Chinese and Maths), English language teaching and learning has played an important role in Chinese education since China opened its door to the West in the late 1970s. However, the value of English as a foreign language lies in its examination grades rather than its communicative function in daily life (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). There is a lack of Communicative Language Teaching methods (CLT) and few opportunities to practice the language, thus Chinese learners are less motivated to focus on the communicative aspects of English (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). For example, 80% of Chinese universities expected their students to pass College English Test Band 4 (CET4) or Band 6 (CET6) until 2006. Although CET tests are no longer linked to a bachelor’s degree in some Chinese universities, a CET certificate is still valued by employers. Consequently, many Chinese undergraduate students invest huge effort and energy into learning English to obtain a CET certificate. However, the heavy focus on the skills most weighted in the test, including reading and listening, and less on speaking and writing (Li, Zhong, & Suen, 2012) in both teaching and learning means that many Chinese students cannot speak or write English despite their long-term’s learning of English (Yu, 2014). Given the competitiveness and lack of quality in education, an increasing number of Chinese middle class families choose to send their children to study in an English-speaking country.

2.3 Studying abroad as an alternative

‘Middle class’ in China is defined by income, education and profession. More specifically, if measured by income, the annual family income from a middle-class family falls between the average national average level (53,000 yuan) and 2.5 times the average level (53,000–132,500 yuan). If measured by education, there is at least one family member who has received university education or above. If measured by occupation, the head of the family will hold a managerial job in a state-owned organization, enterprise or institution, or is a member of a professional or technical team (Song, Cavusgil, Li, & Luo, 2016). Education is increasingly seen as a means of upward social mobility for
the middle class to assert their social status and studying abroad is a trendy alternative to further education.

The ‘push-pull’ factors are often used to explain the reasons for Chinese middle class families to send their children abroad to obtain a university degree from abroad (Iannelli & Huang, 2014). ‘Push’ factors refer to those that “operate within a country and initiate a student’s decision to undertake study abroad” and ‘pull’ factors refer to those that “make another country attractive to students” (Bodycott, 2009). The push factors come from China, including intense completion for limited university space and inferior quality in Tier 3 or Tier 4 universities, which have already been discussed (2.2). The pull factors that attract Chinese families to consider UK HE include “range of programs available”, ‘language and academic support service’, ‘relatives and friends living or studying in the area’, ‘part-time employment while studying’, ‘visa application and acceptance’, and the ability to ‘gain understanding of Western culture’ (Bodycott, 2009, p.361).

Amidst the competition for elite Chinese universities, Chinese middle-class families find alternative ways to achieve this social status by helping their children through transnational education, or through education in an English-speaking country. Moreover, as an undergraduate degree from the West has been devalued with its widespread availability, obtaining a foreign degree from higher ranking institutions in English-speaking countries such as the US, the UK, Canada and Australia has become a trend among particularly the Chinese middle class who originally were from low status backgrounds. They see the international education as an opportunity for their children to “consolidate and legitimate their status gains in symbolic and social forms” in a competitive society where cultural capital is gaining increasing attention (Murphy & Johnson, 2009, p.451). Indeed, a survey shows that two thirds of China’s middle-class parents would not be satisfied with their children’s obtaining undergraduate degrees and three-quarters of them would expect their children to earn postgraduate qualifications (Lin, 2013).

With UK government’s policy to attract international students on a full fee-paying basis, the number of international students in the UK has been on the increase. In 2012–2013 academic year, 13% of the UK student population were international students (1/3 from China), who brought UK universities a 1/8 of their income (International students, 2014). The UK has been the second most favoured destination next to the US for Chinese students (International students, 2014). Chinese international undergraduate students (over 80%) tend to pursue degrees related to business, with only approximately 5% choosing Law (Hou, Montgomery, & McDowell, 2014). The majority continue on to a Master’s course at UK universities due to degree inflation in China (Iannelli & Huang, 2014). The majority of Chinese international students are from middle-class families since they have the financial means to access this (Biao & Shen, 2009). However, these students are expected to face many challenges from a different educational system such as in the UK.
2.4 UK higher education

There are several types of UK universities according to their historical roles. At the top of the university rankings are the two world-leading universities, Oxford and Cambridge, strong in liberal arts education. Next are other universities from the Russell Group, which are research-intensive in arts and science. While many other universities are equally strong in teaching, learning and research according to UK league tables, the Russell Group member universities (originally 19 but now 24 as additional universities become members) tend to enjoy an unrivalled position in terms of status, although the university league tables also fluctuate every year. Next are universities established after WWII. Some appear on the top of the world university rankings. The last are the post-1992 universities, in contrast to the aforementioned traditional or pre-1992 universities. By far the majority of UK HE (74 institutions), most of these post-1992 universities were formed from polytechnics or colleges (Su, 2010).

A combination of teacher-centred and student-centred approaches is expected in UK universities (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000). Students attend lectures, seminars or laboratory classes, in which their active participation in the learning process is expected. Teaching methods involve group work, discussions, debates as well as individual study. The University where the research was conducted, for example, expects students to study autonomously, which means that apart from classroom instructions, students also need to spend time studying individually or in groups outside of class time. There are often no fixed textbooks (unlike Chinese universities), although there can be suggested reading lists. To complete their assignments, students need to do projects and look for academic sources themselves. They can consult teachers through emails. Tutorials and academic support are available but not mandatory. Students can discuss their learning through individual tutorials during teachers’ office hours. Academic support agencies are structured to help students improve their language and academic study skills.

UK educationalists (Biggs, 1996; Biggs, 2003; Entwistle, 2009; McCune & Entwistle, 2011) argue that the ultimate purpose of HE should be equipping students with the ability to construct meaning through relevant activities via higher-order learning processes. Accordingly, HE should create an environment where all elements in the teaching system, especially the teaching methods used and the assessment tasks, should be aligned to the desired learning outcomes (Biggs, 1996, 2003). However, assessment in UK HE sometimes demonstrates another picture.

UK HE assessment usually take these forms: examinations, essays, oral presentations, portfolios, practical reports and in most cases, research projects with a final dissertation for final-year students. These should steer students towards developing understanding and deep learning more than the sole use of examinations prevalent in China. In practice, however, the teaching and learning in UK HE still
present worries. Biggs (1996), for example, has concerns that the preoccupation with accountability and performance indicators in HE can result in measuring the amount of knowledge that students have grasped rather than the quality of their critical understanding or ability to apply this knowledge in UK universities. Students are expected to reproduce information, evident not just in assessments such as multiple choice examinations, but in coursework essay writing. Since the most common procedure for teachers is to award marked based on ‘box-ticking’ for even open ended questions, students are likely to perceive this and thus might endeavour to learn accordingly to obtain high marks (Biggs, 1996). That being said, the emphasis on deep learning in UK HE still forms a clear contrast to the prevalence of surface learning in teaching and learning found in many Chinese universities.

2.5 Language requirements for international students

Most UK universities accept IELTS score or its equivalents as the basic entry requirement for non-native English speakers wishing to enter UK universities. Whereas a minimum of IELTS score of 6 has been suggested as the adequate language level to meet university course demands (Hirsh, 2007), this may vary depending on the rankings of the university and also the nature of specific courses. In general, the recommended scores for undergraduates are: IELTS band 5.5 for English, 6-6.5 for linguistically less demanding academic courses such as history, mechanical engineering and law, and 7.0 for linguistically demanding academic courses, for example, economics (Hyatt & Brooks, 2006). In practice, however, low ranking universities have to accept international students with 0.5-1 band lower than those recommended (Hyatt & Brooks, 2006).

Views on the predicative power of IELTS scores and their impact on university studies have been controversial. While an overwhelming majority of the UK university recruitment staff agree that IELTS is a valid indicator for recruiting international students (Hyatt & Brooks, 2006; Yen & Kuzma, 2009). Yen and Kuzma (2009) finds that the links between IELTS score and university academic outcomes may become weaker after the first semester, when students get more familiar with the UK learning environment. They also argue that although students with low IELTS scores in listening and writing tended to get lower marks, their academic performance became less tied to their initial IELTS scores as their course progressed.

There are also argument that achieving the minimum language requirement may not be sufficient for students to coping with their university studies. Hirsh (2007), for example, argues that while IELTS scores above the recommended threshold did not have much predicative power over students’ university course grades, having a low language proficiency, including those near the threshold does impact on academic success, as they may experience difficulties in listening to and understanding the lectures, participating in discussions and with academic writing academic essays (Hirsh, 2007). Therefore, most UK universities provide the Pre-sessional English (PSE) courses to improve international students’
language competence. However, as will be argued later, many of them are still likely to face challenges in the beginning unless they utilize other opportunities such as the university support available to them.

2.6 Research approaches concerning Chinese international students’ learning experiences

The literature on Chinese international students’ learning experiences in Western universities is abundant thanks to the large number of Chinese students studying in the West. A brief review of the literature reveals that most researchers follow either ‘the large culture’ approach or ‘the small culture’ approach regarding Chinese international students, with the former focuses on generalisations about a cultural group, and the latter, on individuals’ “cohesive behaviour in activities within any social grouping” (Holliday, 1999, p.241). An argument for the third approach, which combines generalisations from a large culture and variations from a small culture views is established.

2.6.1 ‘The large culture’ versus ‘the small culture’ approaches

Holliday (1999) points out when studying people from a certain culture, there has been a tendency to follow the large culture approach, which focuses on “essential features of ethnic, national or international group”. Many of the studies on Chinese students follow this division, to the extent that Chinese students studying in the West, including students from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan in contrast to those from the West, has been collectively called ‘Chinese learners’ under the Confucian-heritage culture, leading in either a culture-surplus model or a culture-deficit model about Chinese students (Ryan & Louie, 2007). The surplus model stresses the positive influence of Confucian values in education and effort on Chinese students’ motivation to learn (Hau & Ho, 2008; Lau & Lee, 2008). The deficit model, on the other hand, highlights the negative influences of Confucian culture. For example, didacticism or teacher-centeredness in teaching and rote learning are cited as the very causes for Chinese international students’ academic challenges in the West, including unwillingness to participate in group discussions (Edwards & Ran, 2006), reluctance to ask teachers questions (Turner, 2006), unfamiliarity with academic writing and a lacking of critical thinking (Ku & Ho, 2010) and difficulty in finding appropriate learning strategies (Gao, 2006).

There are concerns about the explanatory power of collective culture or Confucian culture on Chinese students’ learning (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Ryan & Louie, 2007). Clark and Gieve (2006) openly challenge the large culture view for taking culture as a fixed identity and judging Chinese international students based on their Confucius cultural heritage. They argue that the prevalent practices of treating individual learners as “a homogenised representative of a national culture” (Clark & Gieve, 2006, p.55)with ‘lacks’ and ‘deficits’ can result differentiation in individuals’ personal experiences. Instead, they suggest a ‘small culture’ rationale in discussing Chinese students, which sees them as individuals who respond and interact with their environment in their unique ways. Likewise, Grimshaw (2007) also challenges the stereotyped Western notion of the Chinese learner as one incapable of autonomy and
advocates the adoption of a non-essentialist perspective, whereby cultures are seen to have blurred boundaries and individual’s identities, beliefs and behaviour are subject to change in context and experiences. As a consequence, the attribution of both the virtues and the undesirable behaviours of ‘Chinese learners’ to the influence of Confucian culture, and therefore failing to recognise the complexities within, has resulted in misunderstandings, which negatively impact teaching practices (Ryan & Louie, 2007).

2.6.2 The third approach

The third approach of learning Chinese students combines the focus on the generality from a large culture approach and the focus on the speciality from a small culture approach. Pilcher et al. compare this to a combination of two hubs: “One hub seeks to establish key traits or commonalities among learners designated as ‘Chinese’; and the second hub emphasizes variations and individual differences among such groups.” (Pilcher et al., 2011, p.308). The purpose of this combination is to achieve a balance between generalisation and particularisation:

Arguably, paying attention to research form both hubs can help participants to predict or manage different futures. To say what core issues and characteristic experience some (or many, but not all) students from China will (or many) have needs to be offset by statements of variation and allowance for local contexts…looking only at individual differences and local variation may lose some of the power of generalization, where general statements are warranted (Pilcher et al., 2011, p.309).

While a large culture can be used as a framework for understanding the basics about Chinese students’ cultural of learning, attributing individual Chinese student’ behaviour to the ‘large culture’ view invariably leads to othering Chinese students in contrast to the norm, the Western students. The denunciation of the large culture view, however, does not mean that the research following this approach should be completely abandoned. Indeed, an increasing number of studies conducted by scholars who have direct teaching experience in teaching Chinese students and obtain the data from ethnographical studies in an English-speaking country are based on a combination of both, to achieve both generalisation and specifications (Su, 2010). A common theme has been the challenges that Chinese students encounter during their transcultural education.

2.7 The academic challenges Chinese international students encounter

The academic challenges that international Chinese students experience are termed as ‘learning shock’, which is “unpleasant feelings and difficult experiences that learners encounter when they are exposed to a new learning environment” (Gu, 2009, p.42). Much discussed learning shock include challenges in English language, academic writing and also conceptions of learning (Gu, 2009; Gu & Maley, 2008).
According to the literature (Gu, 2009; Gu & Maley, 2008), using English as a second language tends to be challenging for the majority of Chinese students. English affects Chinese students’ class discussions, essay writing and the integration. This is not surprising, given earlier discussion regarding some Chinese students’ underdeveloped English skills. This language deficiency in combination with habits formed through teacher-centred education in China, is reported to have put them at a disadvantage in class discussions and presentations, which are predominant features in UK higher education (Brown, 2008).

Their learning shock may lead to students’ retreat into their own comfortable zone by avoiding contact with English speakers and interact only with their own compatriots (Brown, 2008). Brown (2008) details the language learning experiences of 13 international Asian postgraduates, including Chinese students. He contends that while this strategy affords comfort and avoids the sense of incoherence and helplessness associated with inadequate English for international students, it may also fail to help these students to improve their English levels.

Writing academic essays using references also appears to be a challenging task for Chinese students, who are used to a system where “sources did not need to be mentioned, even in anthologies – it was assumed that they would be recognised by educated readers.” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p.19). Ignorance of the vigorous demand of their Western universities, Chinese students may also be accused of ‘plagiarism’. However, Gu and Brooks (2008) found that their ten Chinese participants at a UK University succeeded in overcoming plagiarism by learning from their mistakes, discussing problems with tutors, and acquiring the skills in synthesizing materials critically, using correct references and forming their own arguments in academic essays. This suggests that Chinese international students can improve their academic skills through self-reflections and learning from their courses.

The level of critical thinking skills required by Western universities can be another cause for learning shock. A qualitative study by Durkin (2008) on Chinese students’ views of Western argumentation suggests that the majority of the 41 participants did not acculturate into the Western norms of argumentation. Durkin (2008) argues that the British writing convention characterised by “academic argumentation and debate…rooted in the Socratic–Aristotelian pursuit and discovery of truth through the disciplined process of critical thinking” (p.42) can be threatening to Chinese students, coming from a culture where harmony and understanding between people are more important than seeking truth from vigorous argumentation, these students preferred to adopt a more empathetic and constructive way of thinking. Failing to recognize students’ cultural of learning, however, may lead research towards focusing exclusively on certain aspects of features considered to be exclusively Chinese. Central to discussions on cultural of learning is Chinese students’ approaches to learning.
2.8 Chinese students’ approaches to learning

2.8.1 Controversies related to Chinese students’ approaches to learning

Chinese students had been identified as rote learners until recent studies which examine how Chinese students have utilized memorisation in their learning in an effort to demystify the ‘paradox of the Chinese learner’ (Leung, Ginns, & Kember, 2008), who appear to be rote learners but achieve high academic performance. This argument is based on the distinctions between mechanical memorisation and memorisation for understanding in the learning process.

Memorisation for understanding is found to be akin to a deep approach while mechanical memorisation is associated with a surface approach to learning (Marton, Dall’Alba, & Tse, 1996). Memorisation can be part of the learning process in that it helps students to build on their understanding. For example, memorising mathematical formulae or language rules helps students apply them to solution of problems. Likewise, memorising typical law cases and key verdicts forms a basis on which law students analyse their case studies. As students remember facts and figures, they form a link between different elements and understanding takes place when they memorise. In contrast, mechanical memorisation involves treating memorisation as an end in itself (Meyer, 2000) and they do it for recall and reproduction in order to pass assessments or examinations, which is a dominant factor in students’ motivation to learn (Gibbs, Simpson, James, & Fleming, 2004).

In Chinese culture of learning, learning has been traditionally regarded as involving a process of ‘studying extensively, inquiring carefully, pondering thoroughly, sifting clearly, and practicing earnestly’ (as cited in Lee, 1996). Achieving understanding to Chinese students is a long process, which requires laborious mental effort (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000). During the learning process, memorisation and understanding are intertwined, as shown in a well-known Confucian saying in China: Seeking knowledge without thinking is labour lost; thinking without seeking knowledge is perilous. Based on this cultural conception of learning, some researchers, for example, Biggs (1998) would argue that repetition can be qualitatively different from rote learning for Chinese students. Whereas rote learning involves only mechanically committing materials to memory without understanding, repetition involves understanding and also ensures accuracy for Chinese students, who may learn this strategy from their experience of learning Chinese characters. Biggs (1998) further contends that the apparent teacher-centred didacticism actually works well within the Eastern culture because students can achieve understanding in a learning process in which teachers present interesting problems and guide students to solve them by generating multiple approaches to a solution, explaining their methods and learning from wrong answers.

However, Biggs (1998) seems to be presenting a large culture view about Chinese students’ use of repetition and memorisation. Whereas some individual Chinese students memorise for understanding,
and some teachers facilitate deep understanding through probing and guidance, it is equally true that other individual students may simply mechanically memorise factual information by teachers who transmit knowledge. Indeed, due to the intense competitive nature of Chinese educational system and social pressure, there have been tensions between understanding and mechanical memorisation:

Although the terms vary there is current stress on deep learning which goes beyond memorizing or recitation to practical application, through reflective study and high-achievement motivation with disciplined effort, in a continuing tension between outcomes of exam success or employment and the more intrinsic cultivation of the person – the tension between ‘teaching the book’ and ‘teaching the person’ remains (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p. 8)

The situation also applies to some Chinese universities, where teachers may still teach didactically and students learn passively and rote learn to pass the examinations, according to a recent study (Yin et al., 2014). Conducted among 2500 students from 15 Chinese universities, including both the ordinary and the elite, the study finds that students from both types of universities preferred surface learning to deep learning strategies, with those from elite universities more distinctive. The authors hypothesize that the possible reasons could be a combination of the pressure from a competitive learning environment that the students experienced and a lack of autonomy and participation in the students with teachers as the authoritarian, who set the learning objective, design the curriculum and make the assessment.

2.8.2 Gaps in the literature

Individual Chinese students’ learning behaviour can be affected by their cultures of learning, as argued by the large culture view. However, the literature also suggests that individual variations also exist. By combining both hubs of learning, a third approach may enable a comprehensive view of the individuals without neglecting the cultural impact. The research adopting the third approach has been on the increase. Still, few of these studies have explicitly explored how individual students cope with challenges, and even less about what possible factors can lead to individual variations over time. Moreover, most studies have focused on students from the pre-1992 UK universities. As students’ English language competence can also affect their transcultural learning process, there is a need to explore how individual students from the post-1992 universities, who tend to have lower IELTS entry scores, can cope with their studies and make changes, and more importantly, what factors that can contribute to positive changes.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter reviews the differences between Chinese and UK cultures of learning and their consequences on cross-cultural teaching and learning. The emphasis on effort in obtaining high scores at various stages of students’ life may reflect the cultural beliefs in education in China. However, the over-emphasis on the transmission of knowledge from teachers to students, may also lead to the absence
in creativity and critical thinking. By contrast, although there is also the tendency to impose assessment standard, which may divert attention to deep learning in the UK, UK HE with its key feature of student-centredness becomes a favourite destination for many Chinese students. The differences in Chinese and British educational systems create challenges for Chinese international students studying in the UK. To understand individual students’ academic coping and learning, a third approach combining the focus of generalisations from the large culture view and the focus of individual variations from the small culture view is needed.
Chapter 3 Theories affecting students’ learning

3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on discussing the current theories related to students’ academic coping and approaches to learning, including academic goal pursuits, academic coping, mindsets and academic self-efficacy. These theories are used in two ways: Conclusions drawn from this research are based on the data collected with reference to the existing theories. Also, although this research is mainly data-driven, it also uses the existing theories to inform the data collection at a later stage.

3.2 How academic coping affects learning

Coping is defined as “thoughts and behaviours that people use to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful” (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p.746-747). As a strategy of adaptation (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003, p. 217), coping allows students to survive a stressful situation by using strategies, which in turn affects their academic learning outcomes. Given the potential academic challenges that international students may encounter during their cross-cultural education, how they actually cope with these challenges will impact their academic success in UK HE.

3.2.1 Ways of coping and students’ learning

Despite the proliferation of coping measures, many of them are overlapping each other (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Categorizing the different ways by a hierarchical order (Skinner et al., 2003) makes it convenient for comparing and contrasting the effects of different coping strategies. Categories relevant to this research are; problem-focused/emotion-focused coping, approach/avoidance coping, and adaptive/maladaptive coping.

Problem-focused coping involves changing the problems and thus can lead to improved self-efficacy and better well-being; by contrast, emotion-focused coping is associated with high levels of stress because the problem is left unresolved (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). It can be healthier for students to adopt problem-focused coping. A key distinction is between approach coping and avoidance coping. Approach coping involves dealing with the problem or related emotions, whereas avoidance coping avoids the threat or related emotions. Approach coping can be more beneficial to students than avoidance coping because it can lead to the resolution of a problem whereas avoidance coping cannot (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007).

Approach coping is further divided into problem-focused coping and some forms of emotion-focused coping, for example, planning, seeking social support, and positive restructuring (regulating emotions, acceptance, and seeking meaning), among which, planning, seeking social support are problem-focused
and positive restructuring is emotion-focused coping (Skinner et al., 2003). Positive restructuring as emotion-focused coping, is similar to Folkman’s ‘meaning-focused coping’ (Folkman, 2008), as both describe the process in which individuals are able to learn a lesson or deprive positive meaning from negative experiences by reinterpreting a stressful situation in a more positive light. Because positive interpretations make it possible for individuals to stay positive, adjust their emotions and eventually benefit from stressful situations, positive structuring can be a powerful strategy for students coping with their academic challenges.

Avoidance coping mainly involves emotion-focused methods including rumination, avoidance, denial and wishful thinking. Individuals adopting avoidance coping may avoid a problem or pretend that the problem does not exist when they found the problem is overwhelming or beyond their capabilities (Skinner et al. 2003; Carver & Conner-Smith, 2010). In the long term, avoidance coping can be ineffective, as the longer a problem is prolonged, the more stressful the situation will become (Skinner, et. al, 2003). In contrast to approach coping, avoidance coping may prolong the solution of a problem, which should be detrimental to students’ learning.

At the higher level, coping can be divided into two groups—adaptive coping and maladaptive coping based on the coping outcomes. Problem-focused, including some kinds of emotion-focused coping can produce positive effects and are therefore considered adaptive; problem-avoidance coping, including most emotion-focused leave the problems unresolved and therefore, are considered to be maladaptive.

As different forms of coping can produce different learning outcomes, it will be interesting to explore what individual Chinese students’ coping patterns can be and how these may vary with the changes in their learning environment, an area the extant literature has largely ignored.

3.2.2 Three approaches to interpret coping strategies

There have been three major approaches to interpreting why students adopt different coping strategies, namely, trait, contextual and interactive. By identifying the weaknesses of the first two, this review will argue for the adoption of the interactive approach represented by (Chun, Moos, & Cronkite, 2006).

Trait approaches hold that it is personality that influences a person’s perceptions of stress and choice of strategy, which will in turn influence coping results (McCrae & John, 1992). The big-five personality factors, which include openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism, are thought to be related to specific coping strategies (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). More specifically, students characterised by extraversion, conscientiousness and openness tend to treat an event as a challenge and therefore, adopt problem-focused coping. In contrast, students with neuroticism trait together with low conscientiousness tend to treat the event as a threat and therefore employ avoidance coping (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Komaraju, Karau, & Schmeck, 2009).
However, trait approaches fail to tell what students do when faced with real difficult situations. Indeed, an increasing number of studies have demonstrated that although coping and personality can be related to each other to some extent, such relations are not as strong as imagined (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007).

Since “coping is a complex, multidimensional process that is sensitive both to the environment, and its demands and resources, and to personality dispositions that influence the appraisals of stress and resources for coping” (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 747), the contextual approaches (also called process-oriented approaches) have become prominent since the 1980s. According to the contextual approaches (Folkman et al., 1986), what an individual thinks and does varies in a specific situation. This is because coping involves two processes—cognitive appraisal and coping. During cognitive appraisal, individuals evaluate the degree of a stress. They will adopt problem-focused strategies when they consider the problem to be controllable and the situation changeable. Conversely, they will use avoidance strategies when they see the problem as overwhelming and the situation uncontrollable.

While both trait and contextual approaches aim at answering the question of why students cope differently, culture as an important influence in students’ coping process seems to be missing, making them difficult to explore students’ whole learning experiences in the context of cross-cultural transition, where both students’ home and host cultures matter. Responding to this is the interactive coping model described as ‘a model of interplay between context, coping and adaptation’ by Chun, Moos and Cronkite (2006). As seen from Figure 1, the contextual and individual factors are interwoven, with culture serving as the overarching force in the coping process:

![Figure 1. A model of interplay between context, coping and adaptation (Chun, Moos, & Cronkite, 2006, p.30)](image-url)
The model shows that environmental system (Panel I) and the personal system (Panel II) have a joint influence on specific events - transitory conditions (Panel III). These specific events cause reactions in cognitive appraisal and coping skills (Panel IV), which lead to a variety of health and well-being outcomes (Panel V). More specifically, the environmental system (Panel I) is made up of relatively stable aspects of the social environment, including the stresses from society and social resources that individuals may utilize. The personal system (Panel II) is composed of individuals’ characteristics and resources, including their personality traits, their cognitive abilities, competence in interpersonal relationships and communication skills, and self-confidence. Transitory conditions (Panel III) involve those temporary life events and changes, such as going to university, and also possible interventions from outside. Individuals assess the levels of stress in real life situations and judge whether they have enough resources to tackle the problem; the appraisal process leads to the adoption of avoidance-coping strategies (Panel IV). Ultimately, the coping strategies they adopt will affect their health and well-being (Panel V), and successful coping will lead to personal growth and maturation (Chun, Moos, & Cronkite, 2006).

3.2.3 Gap in the literature

The integration of the trait and the contextual approach gives the interactive model more explanatory power. It recognises that cultural beliefs and values may prompt different interpretations towards stress. Still, just as Biggs (1987) hesitates using culture in a static way, this model might be further improved by viewing culture as dynamic. As it stands, this model seems to identify with Holliday’s ‘large culture’ view (Holliday, 1999). What is required now is to explore this model longitudinally as part of a dynamic process. Coping strategies essentially explore cognitions and behaviours in the face of stressful events and situations. One area worthy of further consideration is students’ cognitions and behaviour in relations to their studies since these may be related to their coping when their studies become stressful. In particular, students’ approaches to learning, or how students deal with their study has been found to have a direct influence on the learning outcomes.

3.3 Approaches to studying and learning outcomes

With Marton and Saljo’s seminal paper in 1976, students’ approaches to learning have gained increasing attention because of their impact on the learning process and learning outcomes. Marton and Saljo (1976) identified two qualitatively different levels of information processing among university students who dealt with their reading texts: While some focused on deep-level processing of understanding, others focus on surface-level of processing of reproducing the materials. The theory has since been further tested and developed by Biggs (1987), and Entwistle, Hanley and Hounsell (1979), who identified three distinctive approaches, surface, deep and achieving or strategic approaches.
3.3.1 Features of different approaches to studying

According to Biggs (1987), a surface approach typifies students who see a task as a means to an end, and therefore, rely on rote learning and reproduction of a material or a task in order to meet a demand and to achieve other goals, for example, obtaining a degree. A deep approach typifies students who learn a subject out of interest, and therefore, are able to seek understanding and theorizing the task. Entwistle adds a strategic approach to this list (Entwistle et al., 1979), which describes the students who vary their approach with the situations in order to achieve the highest possible marks by working diligently, efficiently and seeking cues consciously.

As seen from Table 3.1 below, different approaches to learning may lead to different learning outcomes due to the differing coping styles associated with them (Entwistle, Mccune, & Walker, 2001). Whereas deep and strategic approaches are associated with problem-focused, surface approaches are associated with avoidance-coping. Theoretically speaking, deep and strategies approaches are associated with improvement in academic scores while surface approaches with poor academic scores.

Table 3.1: Defining features of approaches to learning and studying (adapted from Entwistle, McCune & Walker, 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deep</td>
<td>Relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Looking for patterns and underlying principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Checking evidence and relating it to conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examining logic and argument cautiously and critically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being aware of understanding developing while learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Becoming actively interested in the course content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface</td>
<td>Treating the course as unrelated bits of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Memorizing facts and carrying out procedures routinely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finding difficulty in making sense of new ideas presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeing little value or meaning in either courses or tasks set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studying without reflecting on either purpose or strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling undue pressure and worry about work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>Putting consistent effort into studying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Managing time and effort effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finding the right conditions and materials for studying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students’ approaches to learning are not the only factors leading to learning outcomes. Contributing factors may also include students’ individual beliefs as well as cultural and educational influences, as illustrated by the 3P Model by Biggs and others (Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001).

3.3.2 The factors influencing approaches to studying and learning outcomes—the 3P model

The 3P model introduced by Biggs et al (2001) illustrates a learning cycle consisting of presage, process and product. Having been modified over the years, the latest model (Figure 2) describes how students’ approaches to studying are affected by the interactions between individual factors and the teaching context, which further differentiates their learning outcomes.

![Figure 2. The ‘3P’ model of teaching and learning by Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001, p.136](image)

Of the personal factors, students can be different in their motives, coping strategies and their preferred approaches to studying. The teaching factors are the main elements in an institution, including teaching objectives, methods, content, difficulty and types of assessment, and the general atmosphere. The personal and teaching factors interact to influence students’ learning behaviour and employment of certain strategies, which contribute to learning outcomes (Biggs et al., 2001).

Deep and strategic approaches should be associated with high levels of learning outcomes whereas surface approaches with low levels of learning outcomes (Biggs, 1996; Biggs et al, 2001).
Entwistle’s (2000) interviews with Edinburgh University students provide strong evidence that “a deep strategic approach to studying is generally related to high levels of academic achievement, but only where the assessment procedures emphasise and reward personal understanding. Otherwise, surface strategic approaches may well prove more adaptive” (Entwistle, 2000, p.4). To ensure the most effective teaching and learning outcome, the different elements in the ecosystem of teaching and learning should be aligned: “We believe that the most effective way of ensuring high quality teaching and learning is for teachers to take responsibility for ensuring that assessment and other contextual elements in the teaching and learning system are constructively aligned to promote deep approaches to studying” (Biggs et al., 2001, p.145).

The 3P model sees students’ approaches as fluid and dynamic, subject to changes in personal and contextual factors (Biggs, 1987; Biggs, 2011; Biggs et al., 2001). Although individual students may have their own preferred approaches to study, they may change their approaches with their perceptions of their environment and their coping resources. Innovative teaching methods, clear teaching goals and standards which encourage learner autonomy and generic skills (Yin et al., 2014) and assessments focusing on deep learning and analytical skills (Parpala, Lindblom-Ylanne, Komulainen, Litmanen, & Hirsto, 2010) can promote deep approaches. By contrast, teacher-centred teaching and highly competitive atmosphere (Yin et al., 2014), heavy workload (Kember, 2004), improper curriculum design and inappropriate assessment can induce surface learning (Biggs et al., 2001; Parpala et al., 2010).

3.3.3 Criticisms on the 3P model

Compared to the earlier 3P Model (Biggs, 1996), language is not stressed in the latest Model (Biggs et al, 2001) but which seems to be covered under a more general term ‘climate’. However, previous literature (Saravanamuthu & Yap, 2014) suggests that English as a second language can influence Chinese students’ choices of surface learning to cope with their workload. Compared to English native speakers, Chinese students with low English competence tend to adopt survival strategies to complete given tasks without deep understanding of the content, possibly due to their difficulty in processing English reading texts when they have not internalised English grammar (Johnson & Ngor, 1996). Given these arguments, the language factor in Chinese students’ learning needs to be highlighted.

However, it is noticeable that culture is not included in the 3P model. This does not mean, however, that Biggs does not recognise the significance of culture in students’ learning. Indeed, the influence of culture on Chines students’ learning has been is evident in Biggs and Watkins’ works. For example, Watkins (2000, p.170) asserts: “Indeed cultural, individual difference and contextual influences may be so closely entwined that it may not be possible to separate these factors”.

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Rather than dichotomizing surface approaches and deep approaches, there has been increasing evidence that students from the East also tend to adopt an intermediate approach, varying from surface to deep (Kember, 2000; Leung, Ginns, & Kember, 2008). For example, Leung et al. (2008) found that while both Hong Kong university students and Australian university students used intermediate approaches to studying, Chinese students were reported to adopt more surface and deep approaches than Australian students. As with Biggs (1998), these authors attribute Chinese students’ learning approaches to their socialisation: They associate learning with memorisation, a skill they have learned from their experience of learning Chinese language and they may also form a habit to memorise answers under the influence of the examination-oriented and teacher-centred Chinese education. The research also intends to explore how Chinese students’ use of memorisation during their transcultural education to clarify controversies related to Chinese students’ approaches to studying.

3.3.4 International Chinese students’ approaches to studying

There have been several qualitative studies detailing the changes in Chinese students’ approaches to learning in English-speaking countries with mixed findings. For example, a qualitative study (Wang & Byram, 2011) indicates that the 14 post-graduate Chinese students learned to mix Western approaches to studying with their preferred approaches during their ten-month study in the UK. Therefore, the combined approaches still featured some cultural concepts of learning, including learning through effort, and achieving academic success via repetition and memorisation, learning through reflections, and learning with humility or modesty.

Another qualitative study (Saravanamuthu & Yap, 2014) suggests that the seven Chinese undergraduate students studying in an Australian university displayed differences in their learning behaviour despite the intervention from the university. In this study, all participants showed signs of surface learning at the initial stage of their study due to their past educational Chinese education. After the university intervention which aimed at facilitating deep learning and adaptation to Western independent thinking and independent study, four participants were able to make changes whereas three others continued to pursue surface learning due to either their low language levels, or little interest in their subjects or fear of failure.

3.3.5 Gap in the literature

The above review suggests that Chinese students may adopt surface learning approaches to learning because of the influence from their teacher-centred and examination-oriented education in China; however, their approaches may also change as they gain better understanding of the new educational requirements. As illustrated in the 3P model (Biggs et al., 2001), students’ approaches to learning are influenced by their immediate teaching and learning context. It is of interest to explore how their UK teaching and learning environment, which focuses more on analytical thinking and independent work,
can affect individual Chinese students’ conceptions of learning and this was therefore included in the research.

The sequence of goals—cognitions—achievement in cognitive science suggests that students’ achievement goals affect their cognitive learning strategies, including their approaches to learning (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Covington, 2000). Different goal pursuits may produce different learning outcomes.

3.4 Goal pursuits and their effects on learning

There are several competing motivation theories that have been used to explain students’ learning behaviour, for example, goal theory, which was initiated by Dweck (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), but which has been developed by others; the self-efficacy theory by Bandura (1986) and self-determination theory by (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Among these, goal theory is about achievement goals in cognition, which might be argued to overlap with approaches to studying in education. More specifically, achievement goals “concern the pursuit of competence in achievement situations, and they represent students' motivational orientation in particular situations” (Harackiewich, Barron, & Elliot, 1998, p.2). As different forms of achievement goals produce differing effects on learning, they appear relevant to the study of Chinese students’ learning and coping.

3.4.1 Learning goals versus performance goals

Achievement goals are distinguished into two broad categories, learning goals and performance goals (Elliot & Dweck, 1988), although alternative terms have been used by others (Maehr & Midgley, 1991; Nicholls, 1984). Performance goals have been further divided into approach and avoidance orientations to account for the complexity of the relationship between goals and behaviour (Elliot & Church, 1997), creating the three achievement orientations: (1) mastery or learning goals focus on developing competence and mastering tasks; (2) performance-approach goals describes motivation to learn for the sake of gaining favour from others, or outperform others or avoid negative evaluations on competence; (3) performance-avoidance goals focus on avoiding looking incompetent relative to others (Dweck, 1986; Covington, 2000). The pursuits of different single goals may produce different learning outcomes. Mastery goals have been generally associated with positive effects on education (Liem, Lau, & Nie, 2008; Wolters, 2004) and avoidance goals are associated with negative effects (Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). Also, studies suggests that performance-approach goals in contrast to performance-avoidance goals can also lead to positive academic performances, including high marks, effort and persistence in college students (Harachiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Wolters, 2004).

Recent studies show that the relationships between different goal orientations and their effects on learning can be more complex than this original construct has envisioned. For example, whereas a
performance-avoidance goal negatively affect the learning outcomes, there have been mixed findings with a performance-approach goal, which has led to finer distinctions of the performance-approach goals. Grant and Dweck (2003), for example, suggest that two forms of performance of goals—ability goals (seeking to validate their ability) and normative performance goals (seeking to outperform others) produce different outcomes. Specifically, ability goals are associated with low motivation, loss of self-worth, low effort, and other forms of behavioural disengagement such as withdrawal, rumination and helplessness. Normative performance goals, as they are commonly known, can be related to both learning goals and performance goals. Although normative goals can also be associated with low intrinsic interest when receiving repeated setbacks, they are also related to seeking help, as people holding such goals often have strong ability beliefs about themselves.

Furthermore, Elliot and McGregor (2001) have added approach and avoidance approaches to both mastery goals, changing the goal theory into a 2x2 framework to explain the complexity of goal pursuits. The new goal theory framework consists of four goal orientations: mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach and performance-avoidance (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Cury, Elliot, Da Fonseca, & Moller, 2006). Mastery approach orientation describes a student who learns a subject for the sake of understanding and mastery whereas mastery avoidance orientation describes a student who learns for the sake of avoiding failing mastering the subject (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Although empirical research (Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010) suggests that mastery goals can be associated with negative emotional outcomes such as showing worry, concern and fear towards possible negative results, such findings may appear inconclusive due to the limited studies done.

This research will focus on the three-orientation framework consisting of mastery, performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals. This is because most research so far has produced consistent findings based on this division, and also because these theories are more congruent with the themes emerging from the data.

3.4.2 Multiple goal pursuits and their effects on learning

Although earlier literature has focused on mainly the effects of single goal pursuits, an increasing number of studies have demonstrated that due to the complex nature of the learning context, students tend to pursue multiple goals, rather than single goals (Harackiewicz, Barron & Elliot, 1998; (Harackiewicz et al., 2000; Linnenbrink, 2005). Indeed, some literature (Harackiewicz et.al, 2000; Pintrich, 2003; Valle et al., 2003)suggests that students can benefit more from multiple, goals than from single goal pursuits. For example, Linnenbrink (2005) did a quasi-experiment to test three goal orientations (mastery, performance-approach, combining mastery/performance-approach) either singularly or combined reveals these: When measured singularly, mastery goals predict high self-efficacy, interest, seeking help, self-regulation, achievement and also positive feelings. By contrast,
although performance approach goals predict some positive outcomes in terms of help-seeking, self-regulation and achievement, they are also related to negative affects including lower self-efficacy, lower interest and seeking help at the last minute. The combination with mastery goals can help offset the negativity in performance goals so that the combined goals create similar positive effects to mastery goals.

An explanation for the desired effect of the combination between mastery and performance goals is this: Because performance approach goals are associated with high academic performance and mastery goals are associated with interest, when these two are combined, students could be motivated to learn and to achieve (Valle, et.al, 2003). To put it another way, the combination can lead to optimal learning because the educational settings tend to be competitive. When assessments are used to check their academic progress, students have to manage to coordinate these goals within their capacity and benefit from “adopting goals that fit or match the contextual goal stresses” (Pintrich, 2003, p.676).

It is worth noticing that mastery goals alone bear little relationship with academic achievement in Linnenbrink’s 2005 experiment, which seems to contradict the original goal theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Linnenbrink’s quantitative study was based on the data obtained by asking 5th and 6th graders in an American school to complete questionnaires in 5-weeks’ time. The short length of the data collection may not be sufficient to explain how students’ goal orientations can impact on their learning in the long run. Nevertheless, similar findings also find echoes in Senko et al. (2011). A possible explanation for this finding could be that unlike students with performance orientations, students with mastery orientations do not seem to focus on the evaluation criteria in terms of strategy choice over their study (Valle et.al, 2003). Another explanation could be ‘the learning agenda hypothesis’, which states that students with mastery goals select topics based on their interests (Senko & Miles, 2008). Therefore, their interest in the topic drives them and could lead to a possible mismatch between what the students study and produce for the assessment and what they are actually asked to produce and being assessed on, leading to lower marks (Senko et al., 2011). By contrast, students with performance orientations may adopt a more ‘strategic’ approach which involves cue-seeking, by first carefully deriving from teachers what are to be assessed, then utilising cognitive planning, and other coping strategies that help them obtain high scores (Entwistle et al., 1979).

How students manage to consolidate these and succeed academically has not been empirically clear (Harackiewicz & Linnenbrink, 2005), perhaps due to a lack of qualitative work in this area. One possible explanation is that students may be flexible in their goals and they pursue what seems most relevant. For example, they may follow their own interest to pursue mastery goals during the term, but shifts to performance goals either to outperform others or to demonstrate their own abilities when dealing with their assignments or exams (Senko et al., 2011). Thus, setting priority may allow them to learn for both their own interest and high scores in their assessments.
Achievement goal theory has mainly evolved from and been tested in English-speaking counties, whose cultures of learning can differ from those in China. Therefore, research into how goals interfere in Chinese students’ learning in the UK can be of relevance to this research. Indeed, the research into Hong Kong Chinese students (Kember, Hong, & Ho, 2008; Lau & Lee, 2008; Salili & Lai, 2003) finds that apart from achievement goals, Chinese students are also influenced by social goals.

3.4.3 Social goals and their effects on learning

Social goals are defined as “perceived social purposes of academic achievement or failure” (Urdan & Maehr, 1995, p. 224). There have been two prominent groups of researchers discussing social goals from different perspectives, represented by Wentzel (2000), and Urdan and colleagues (Urdan & Maehr, 1995; Urdan, Solek, & Schoenfelder, 2007) respectively. While both groups focus on the influence of goal structure on learning and both recognise the essential role of social goals in students’ academic achievement (Urdan, 2004; Urdan & Maehr, 1995; Wentzel, 2000), Wentzel (2000) stresses how socially approved behaviours, such as making friends and showing responsibility (e.g. abiding by school rules and following the teachers) affect academic achievement, whereas Urdan and colleagues are interested in how social goals originating from contextual factors including cultural values affect students’ goal orientations (Urdan & Maehr, 1995; Midgely & Urdan, 2001). Relevant to this research is Urdan’s social goals.

Social goals appear to be intertwined with achievement goals in Chinese culture. This is because achievement goals can be influenced by self-construal, which involves the perception of self in relation to others. Markus and Kitayama (1991) propose that individuals from collectivistic societies tend to have an interdependent self-construal whereas individuals from individualistic societies tend to have an independent self-construal. The emphasis on interdependence among in-group members also means that individuals are likely to be attentive and respond to others to maintain group harmony (Hofstede et al., 2010). This may mean that Chinese students’ goal pursuits tend to be influenced by their in-group members (e.g., their parents and their relatives), as evidenced by the literature (Dekker & Fischer, 2008; Niles, 1995).

A meta-analysis on different goal choices across 13 societies, including both individualistic culture (e.g., the UK, the US and Germany) and collectivistic culture (e.g., China, Japan and Korea) suggests that in both cultures, students’ goal choices (mastery and performance goals) are related to their cultures (Dekker & Fischer, 2008). More specifically, with strong social pressure to perform well in order to bring honour to the in-group and family, students from collectivistic cultures like China are found to pursue performance goals, which lead them to superficial learning and mechanical memorisation. Conversely, students from individualistic societies are found to be more likely to pursue mastery goals, more engaged in deep learning and more willing to take challenging tasks because they do not feel
bound to social prescriptions. This finding echoes an early study by Nile (1995), who found that compared to Australian university students who were motivated by competition or outperform others (performance orientation), Asian international students, the majority of whom were Chinese, were more motivated by social approval, especially parental expectations.

There have been controversies over the effects of social goals on students’ learning. One claim is that social goals, particularly those imposed by others bring with them harmful effects on students’ learning. Chang and Wong (2008) investigated how social goals involving significant others (parents, teachers, peers and the community) influenced the achievement goals of Chinese students in a Singaporean University. The result suggests that social goals led to performance goals but not to mastery goals or academic interest; just on the contrary, they detracted students from future engagement. In other words, when students choose a particular task for the sake of significant others, they are less likely to be engaged in the task in the future. Furthermore, since their academic failure may imply the humiliation of the whole family in Confucian societies, students who pursue goals to meet their parents’ expectations are more likely to be driven by extrinsic motivation rather than intrinsic motivation to succeed academically, and are therefore, less likely to enjoy the process of learning. On the other hand, other studies suggest that social goals do not always lead to maladaptation in collectivistic cultures (Ho, Hau, & Salili, 2008; Tao & Hong, 2014). Family obligations, which are often criticised for pushing Chinese students for adopting problem-avoidance behaviour and surface learning strategies, can contribute to Chinese students’ persistence in their learning (Fuligni, 2001).

The central argument seems to lie in whether social goals promote Chinese students to adopt performance orientation, which leads to surface learning approaches. Chinese students seem to be able to embrace what appear to be conflicting ideas including performance and mastery goals. Whether they may “internalise the responsibility and sense of value for extrinsic goals” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.56) merits attention, as the more internalised a goal becomes, the more likely students will pursue them with determination and interest (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

3.4.4 Gap in the literature

The literature suggests that Chinese students may pursue social goals in addition to achievement goals. Students may also vary their goals based on their perceptions of their own ability and the conditions in the learning environment. Given that differences exist between UK and Chinese cultures of learning, how Chinese students’ pursuits can impact their transcultural education need to be considered. Significant factors that have already been widely discussed in the literature include teaching, assessment, peer relationship and teacher-student relationship.
3.5 Influences from educational factors

Goal structures have been found to significantly affect students’ choice of achievement goals (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Students’ perceptions about their goal structures may come from messages from their teachers. Whereas a performance goal structure emphasizing social comparison, ability and evaluation may promote a performance personal goal pursuit, a mastery goal structure focusing on the process and valuing self-referenced standards and self-regulation in learning promotes a mastery personal goal pursuit (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Furthermore, language as a medium of communication may also affect international students’ goal orientations.

3.5.1 Teachers’ influence

Students generally derive their perceptions of classroom or school goal structure from the messages teachers convey. Teachers’ beliefs in achievement goals help shape students’ goal choices through their (1) instructional practices, (2) interpersonal relationships with students (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998), and (3) evaluation of students’ performances (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006), such as assessment and feedback.

A class which focuses on correct answers, memorisation, ability and competition encourages a performance goal for students to focus on their perceptions of competence and ability, and to adopt surface learning strategies (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Meece et al., 2006). In contrast, a class which stresses meaning and understanding, process-learning, self-comparison and effort can help foster a mastery goal so that students may learn for themselves and for deep understanding, which can also lead to more effective strategies in dealing with their studies including being optimistic, problem-focused, proactive, and flexible. The positive results associated with such behaviour and strategies in turn may also strengthen their self-efficacy and motivation to study (Schunk & Pajares, 2001).

Many strategies are suggested for encouraging students to pursue mastery goals. One way to achieve this is through designing teaching tasks that encourage deep learning (Ames, 1992), including (1) they are reasonably challenging but interesting to students; (2) they aim at meeting short-term self-comparison goals; (3) they give students both autonomy and strategy supports; and (4) they focus on effort, encouraging process learning and failure-tolerance. These ideas also find support from self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (2000), which stresses that competence, autonomy and relatedness are essential for motivating students to learn.

Better classroom atmosphere, or “attitude toward learning, norms of social interaction, acceptance of ideas and mistakes, and learning structures set by the teacher” (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006, p.340), also helps create teacher-student relationship conducive to mastery goal pursuits. Students’ perceptions of this relationship can impact on their sense of belonging. Urdan and Schoenfelder (2006) propose
creating a sense of autonomy in students by trying to “provide meaningful and challenging work, allow students to take ownership over their work, and provide a caring and supportive structure for learning” (p. 338). This is because students are likely to be intrinsically motivated, ready to take challenges, and willing to take responsibilities for their own learning when they perceive their teachers as trustworthy, exerting high standard, caring and supportive (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006).

Equally importantly, providing constructive teacher feedback can influence students’ goal-setting and goal-achievement. According to Dweck (2000), teacher feedback focusing on learning goals by stressing effort and strategy use leads to better achievement than focusing on performance goals. Therefore, formative feedback with narrative evaluation and normative feedback focusing on the marks can produce completely different effects on students’ motivation to learn. Research (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) suggests that teachers can encourage deep learning by (1) providing feedback against pre-defined criteria so that students know exactly what is expected of them; (2) giving feedback before submission so that students could have enough time to improve their work; (3) offering advice on how to improve instead of only on providing evaluation remarks; (4) providing limited but well-thought feedback and prioritising areas for improvement, and (5) avoiding judgemental comments so students could focus on the task itself rather than their intelligence or ability.

The benefits of feedback as a dialogue may help create learning instead of performance goals, and avoid the situation where students may focus only on the marks and ignore the comments (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & William, 2005). This feedback-as-dialogue involves using the initial feedback to create later opportunities for students to interact with the teacher to discuss their problems. By interacting with teachers, students may understand the standard of expectations and evaluations, and make necessary adjustment and learn through the process (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). More importantly, providing formative feedback also encourages students to do self-evaluation and self-reflection, which are essential coping strategies for them to learn to become self-regulated learners.

Admittedly, while generally goal structures can bring about different effects on academic goals, such influences do not always happen due to the misalignment between what teacher and students deem as most important. Teacher’s messages can be filtered by individual students’ perceptions, as goal structures can also be subjective (Ames, 1992; Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan, & Midgley, 2002). Moreover, students pursuing mastery-orientated students may not perform as well as those pursuing performance goals. By contrast, performance-orientated students may lead to achieve high marks because these students tend to be eager cue-seekers and are constantly alert to teacher’s messages, and adopt strategic approaches to meet contextual demands (Entwistle et al., 1979). Working out the rules of the game to gain high scores in assessment may lead students to seek their own agenda and ignore teachers’ messages.
3.5.2 The influence of assessment

The literature indicates that different forms of assessments significantly affect students’ achievement goals (Tait, 2010; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Students learn the rules of assessment in the goal structures and act accordingly. When they perceive the assessment involves testing the quantity of knowledge they have acquired, they are likely to pursue performance goals. On the contrary, when they perceive the assessment focuses on the quality and the application of knowledge that they have learned, they are likely to adopt mastery goals (Harackiewicz et al., 1997; Scouller, 1998).

Many studies have confirmed the variation of students’ learning behaviour. Scouller (1998) compared the effects of multiple choice questions (MCQ) versus assignment essays on approximately 200 University of Sydney undergraduate students. The findings suggest that students were more likely to adopt surface learning approaches when they were preparing for MCQ and deep learning approaches when dealing with their essay. Moreover, students with deep learning approaches obtained high marks for essay writing, but low marks for MCQ. Conversely, students with surface learning approaches obtained high marks for MCQ but low marks for essay writing. Scouller (1998) argues that because essay writing assesses students’ quality of learning, which involves demonstrating their ability in deep level analysis and understanding whereas MCQ tests the quantity of knowledge students have learned, students with different learning approaches received remarkably different results.

Since assessment influences the volume, focus and quality of study (Gibbs et al., 2004), it follows that designing appropriate assessment can encourage mastery goals. Firstly, since the amount of time students put into a task makes a difference in their performances, sufficient assessment tasks should be provided for learning to take place. Secondly, because students tend to focus only on what are to be assessed, there should be frequent assignments and tests for students to distribute their time to the important areas of a course. Thirdly, assignments should consist of certain activities which encourage the process of learning rather than the assessment themselves.

3.5.3 The influence of the language factor

Language as the medium for communications can mediate students’ motivation to study their content, especially in an L2 learning context. Because students are still grade-driven in educational settings (Covington, 1999), they tend to sacrifice learning goals for performance goals and adopt some surface learning approaches such as rote learning or rehearsal to pass an exam. This can become very distinct in situations where the instructional language is not the mother tongue. Salili and Lai (2003) compared how students’ mother tongue Chinese and English as a foreign language affected the motivation of secondary school Chinese students in Hong Kong. They found that students resorted to surface learning in order to complete their tasks because found dealing with the English language while learning the subject was too time-consuming for them. Given the challenges and the pressure Chinese international
students experience in English-speaking universities, English could also be a contributing factor to their goal pursuits.

3.5.4 Conclusion

Students’ goal pursuits are influenced by the goal structures in the teaching and learning environment. Factors such as meaningful learning tasks, formative feedback, harmonious teacher-student relationship, and the assessment-for-learning practices can all help contribute to students’ higher motivation, sense of belonging, problem-focused coping and deep learning. However, goal structures as external motivational mechanism alone cannot account for why individual students may behave differently (adopt differing goals) despite similar goal structures in the learning environment. Students may adopt either learning or performance goals, or even multiple goals depending on their perceptions of the goal structures they perceive. Research exploring individual differences reveals that those who become resilient despite their environment have beliefs about themselves that differentiated them from others regarding their abilities to cope with difficulties (Bandura et al., 1996; Job, Dweck, & Walton, 2010; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Some self-theories such as mindset theory (Dweck, 2000) and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) provides framework for exploring the individual factors involved in the learning process.

3.6 Mindset theory and students’ learning

Implicit theory of intelligence, better known as mindset theory by Dweck (2006), concerns people’s beliefs about whether their own or others’ attributes such as intelligence can be developed or not (Dweck, 2008). Dweck (2006) argues that individual differences in approaching academic situations are closely related to the mindsets they hold about their intelligence. People with more of a growth mindset (also called incremental theorists) hold that human attributes are malleable so that they can be further developed through effort and strategies. In contrast, people with more of a fixed mindset (also called entity theorists) believe that human attributes are fixed and therefore whatever they do, they cannot be developed. An increasing number of empirical studies in recent years has tested and confirmed that the different mindsets affect students’ learning outcomes (Dweck, 2008; Hong et al., 1999).

3.6.1 Characteristics of different mindsets

According to Dweck (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) the causal relationships between mindsets and learning outcomes are established via their achievement goals. A growth and a fixed mindset are associated with learning or performance goals respectively depending on students’ differing beliefs in ability, that is, whether they think their ability is incremental or fixed (Dweck, 2000). As illustrated in Table 3.2 below, since students with a growth mindset believe that their ability can be improved through effort, they tend to adopt learning goals, which feature a focus on the learning process rather than the results, and
willingness to take challenges and to invest effort and time when they encounter difficulties. By contrast, Furthermore, as students with a fixed mindset focus on competing with others or aggrandizing themselves, they may choose only easy tasks, avoid challenges, and invest less effort in a task to avoid looking stupid should they fail (Dweck, 1986; Covington, 2000).

Table 3.2: Achievement goals & achievement behaviour (cited in Dweck, 1986, p.1041)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of intelligence (Intelligence is fixed)</th>
<th>Goal orientation (Goal is to gain positive judgments/avoid negative judgments of competence)</th>
<th>Confidence in present ability</th>
<th>Behavior pattern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entity theory</td>
<td>Performance goal</td>
<td>If high → Mastery-oriented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Goal is to gain positive judgments/avoid negative judgments of competence)</td>
<td>Seek challenge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>but High persistence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If low → Helpless</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Avoid challenge</td>
<td>Low persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incremental theory (Intelligence is malleable)</td>
<td>Learning goal (Goal is to increase competence)</td>
<td>If high → Mastery-oriented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Seek challenge (that fosters learning)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>or Low Maturity-oriented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High persistence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.6.2 Impact of different mindsets on learning

The implications on educational outcomes are profound. Learning goals are associated with adaptive coping strategies featuring problem-focused and some emotional-focused coping. In contrast, performance goals are associated with maladaptive coping strategies such as problem-avoidance and emotion-focused coping (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). As suggested in Table 3.2, the behaviours between students with learning goals and those with performance goals do not vary much when dealing with easy tasks and differing behavioural patterns start when difficulties arise. Later studies (Hong et al., 1999; Grant & Dweck, 2003) also confirm that students with a fixed mindset show low confidence, low effort attribution and are therefore, less likely to take remedial measures to address their problems; instead, they engage in handicapping behaviour, rumination and procrastination. Students with a growth mindset, on the other hand, believes that ability and effort are positively related, and therefore, are more likely to invest in more effort and time in improving themselves.

A number of studies (Hong et al., 1999; Dweck, 2008) also confirm that students with a growth mindset are likely to take remedial actions, including changing strategies or seeking help after setbacks because they believe that their ability can be improved through effort. In contrast, those with a fixed mindset are less likely to improve their situation because of either their disbelief in effort, or their associating success through effort with a lack of ability. Such debilitating thoughts lead these students to avoid
problems for self-protection, even though this means losing opportunities to learn. A neuroscientific study by Mangels and colleague (2006) also indicates that mindsets impact success under challenging situations. Focusing on the neural response to learning feedback, the experiment identifies different brain wave patterns between students with different mindsets when processing their feedback. In contrast to those with a growth mindset, the brainwaves of those with a fixed mindset appear to attend to only semantic processing (a surface level of understanding), also show less sustained attention towards conceptual processing of information (a deep level of understanding), thus reducing their opportunities to correct their errors in subsequent retest.

A recent study by Burnette, Boyle, Van Epps, and Pollack (2012) suggests that mindsets interfere in self-regulatory processes, including goal setting, goal operating and goal monitoring, and therefore, they matter in learning. First, during goal setting, incremental theorists tend to set learning goals whereas entity theorists tend to set performance goals. Then, during goal operating, incremental theorists tend to adopt more mastery-oriented than performance-oriented strategies, but entity theorists tend to adopt more performance-oriented goals. Finally, the goal monitoring process reveals the biggest difference between the two mindsets, particularly when setbacks, and hence the fear of failure, are involved. Entity theorists do not engage in the monitoring process very often, as they tend to see fear of failure as a threat to success and therefore, they avoid using monitoring strategies to reduce their discrepancy between the actual and the ideal state. Consistent with the coping literature (Skinner et al., 2003), avoiding rather than engaging in problem solving often left entity theorists with negative emotions that are associated with disengagement behaviour. By contrast, incremental theorists tend to engage in monitoring process more often, as they treat fear of failure as an opportunity to help them achieve success. To them, constant monitoring and improving help reduce the discrepancy between the actual and ideal self. As they are problem-focused and adaptive, incremental theorists tend to experience positive emotions and positive success expectations.

The significance of mindsets in students’ motivation means that educators should divert their attention to foster a growth mindset in students through strategies and practices (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011), which is possible because mindsets are malleable. According to Dweck (2015), most people exhibit two mindsets (a growth mindset and a fixed mindset) on a continuum. This means students’ mindsets can be changed through psychological interventions to increase resilience, decrease stereotyping and improve in academic performance (Dweck, 2008; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). For example, by praising students for effort and strategy use, instead of praising their intelligence; encouraging students to set higher-order or long-term goals, creating an atmosphere where students feel socially belonged, encouraging students to be self-regulated, and providing strategy training (Dweck, et al., 2011). Some recent studies reveal how a growth mindset can be less influenced by stereotyping
and more likely to express sense of belonging and to show resilience in dealing with their challenges in learning (Good, Rattan, & Dweck, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

3.6.3 Conclusion

Mindsets impact students’ learning process and their learning outcomes. Mindsets regulate individuals’ goal choices, influences the processes of goal pursuits and goal monitoring. The positive news is that students’ mindsets can be changed through intervention. However, as most of these quantitative studies have been conducted with American students, this leaves open the question concerning whether mindset theory can also be applicable to possible changes in Chinese international students’ transcultural learning. Due to different cultures of learning, Chinese students are expected to encounter considerable challenges, and therefore, how the mindsets of these students interferes in their academic motivation is worth exploring.

3.7 Self-efficacy theory and learning

By far the most heavily researched and credible self-theory is self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1986) as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (p.391). Self-efficacy reportedly is the very force that motivates people to attain their goals and sustained self-efficacy motivates them to persevere when confronted with challenges (Schunk, 2003). Self-efficacy can be a theory relevant to this study as it can help explain individual students’ motivational changes and how these changes may contribute to their learning outcomes. Although not stated explicitly, the self-efficacy held by individuals with a more growth mindset does not seem to be weakened by a challenging situation whereas the self-efficacy held by those with a more fixed mindset does. How mindsets and self-efficacy interact to affect international students’ academic learning is also worth exploring.

3.7.1 Factors influencing self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is not fixed. Individuals gain their self-efficacy mainly from four sources, including (1) their own performances, which is thought to be the most reliable and also most powerful source of self-efficacy; (2) vicarious experiences, which come from observing others’ performances; (3) persuasion, which may be received from others’ feedback, and (4) physiological conditions, which is indicated by body reactions to a specific task, for example, anxiety can sometimes indicate lack of skills (Schunk, 1991).

According to Bandura (1993), individual’s self-efficacy can be either increased or lowered by social comparison. Likewise, students evaluate themselves including their own abilities and their self-esteem through social comparison, the result of which further affects their self-regulation and their performances. Their self-efficacy maybe lowered when seeing others perform better than themselves,
and this can lead to irrational thinking and poorer performances. Conversely, seeing their own progress may increase their self-efficacy necessary for analytical thinking and better performances.

3.7.2 Academic self-efficacy affecting learning and academic coping

Academic self-efficacy, defined as students’ belief in their capabilities, influences their academic motivation in several important ways. Some of the main influences include goal setting, choice of activities, effort, persistence, coping strategies, resilience to difficulties and their causal attribution for success and failures (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 2003; Zimmerman, 2000).

Both goals and self-efficacy are essential to students’ learning (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Indeed, there is a symbiotic relationship between goals and self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1993), individuals need to have self-efficacy to set goals for themselves and the stronger their self-efficacy, the higher goals they set for themselves. The evaluation of their performances in comparison with their goals helps them see the discrepancies, which may in turn motivate them to invest in more effort to reduce (Schunk, 2003). Furthermore, as pointed out by Bandura (1993), individuals are motivated not only by reducing discrepancies but also increasing them. The stronger self-efficacy that students gain from realising their goals can motivate them towards creating new goals, which also creates new discrepancies, and hence the cycle continues.

However, different goals may also affect self-efficacy. For example, in comparison with general, long-term and very difficult goals, specific, short-term and sufficiently challenging goals are more likely to promote self-efficacy and motivation as they allow individuals to see their own progress (Schunk, 2003). Therefore, creating realistic and achievable goals seems to be vital for students to sustain their self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy has a direct effect on self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2000). Whereas initial self-efficacy motivates individuals into actions, self-efficacy in self-regulation provides the “staying power” in adversity (Bandura, 1993, p.136), which allows them to engage in tasks using both cognitive and metacognitive strategies, investing in more effort, employing more learning strategies and persevere when faced with challenges (Schunk, 1991). Strong self-efficacy in self-regulation also “provides the necessary restraining power” when there are other competitive interesting distractions (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994).

Academic self-efficacy affects students’ academic coping styles. According to the coping literature, when perceiving they have enough coping resources, individuals will see the situation as challenging and adopt a problem-focused approach coping style; when perceiving they have insufficient resources, they see the situation as threatening, and hence adopting avoidance-coping (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Similarly, students with low academic self-efficacy have high fear of failure and perceive a
difficult situation as threatening (Ptuwain, Woods, & Symes, 2010) and therefore, are more likely to adopt a performance goal instead of a mastery goal, which may subsequently affect the learning outcomes.

3.7.3 The calibration of self-efficacy

Although both overconfidence and under-confidence have detrimental effects on motivation to learning (Schunk, 2003), most self-efficacy literature seems to focus on its positive role in human motivation, suggesting that the higher self-efficacy, the better (Ning & Downing, 2010; Zimmerman, 2008). However, several studies (Vancouver & Kendall, 2006; Wheatley, 2002; Wyatt, 2015), suggest that because there needs to be a reasonable fit between one’s self-efficacy and the competence; over-confidence can breed complacency.

Actually, Bandura (1986) holds that success depends on a fairly accurate assessment of self-efficacy and that a slightly higher rating of one’s self-efficacy helps individuals to make more effort and persevere. However, he did not specify the exact height of the raised self-efficacy, which seems hard to define anyway. Similarly, Bandura and Jourden (1991) also cautioned that there should be a limit for self-efficacy to be functional, arguing that “complacent self-assurance creates little incentive to expend the increased effort needed to attain high levels of performance” (p. 949).

Despite such precautions however, most studies do not seem to have assessed the calibration of students’ self-efficacy (Schunk, 1991, 2003). Whereas low self-efficacy is unlikely to engage students in tasks, overly self-efficacious may prevent them from making more effort and utilise more strategies, thus lowering their performances. Vancouver & Kendall (2006), for example, have argued that self-efficacy can also negatively impact on motivation. Their research on undergraduate students’ self-efficacy and motivation to study for the upcoming examinations suggest that the high self-efficacy held by students resulted in their underestimation of the study time required and spending less time on revision, which led to the conclusion that “self-efficacy is likely to play a negative role on resource allocation, which may adversely affect performance” (Vancouver & Kendall, 2006, p.1152).

Indeed, whereas too many self-doubts will not mobilize people to action because they cannot envision the positive outcome of their effort (Bandura, 1993), some doubt may help providing that people are still efficacious about their own behaviour. Schunk (2003) shares a similar view. He contends that “some doubt about whether one will succeed can mobilize effort and lead to better use of strategies than will feeling overly confident” (p.162), which finds further support in Wheatley (2002) and Wyatt (2015).
3.7.4 How self-efficacy and mindset theory interact in students’ learning

“Perceived self-efficacy is measured in terms of judgments of personal capabilities and the strength of that belief” (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Self-efficacy is malleable, which means that it can be either increased or decreased. While over self-efficacy in students can lead to less effort, low self-efficacy from repeated failures can result in little motivation. Therefore, students need an appropriate level of self-efficacy to sustain their motivation to learn. As Bandura and Locke (2003, p.97) argue:

A resilient sense of efficacy provides the necessary staying power in the arduous pursuit of innovation and excellence. During difficult endeavours, people have to invest a great deal of time and effort and have to be willing to take risks under uncertainty. Those of high perceived self-efficacy focus on the opportunities worth pursuing, whereas the less self-efficacious dwell on the risks to be avoided.

The strong beliefs can be linked with a growth mindset; issues relating to low self-efficacy can be overcome with a growth mindset too. Because students with more of a growth mindset believe in changes in their intelligence, they are more likely to invest their time and effort (and strategies) to overcome challenges. Thus, it seems that a growth mindset can be the sustaining power for a resilient sense of efficacy.

3.7.5 Gap in the literature

Sufficient evidence indicates that both students’ mindsets and their academic self-efficacy impact their learning process. However, research findings in these areas are mainly derived from Westerner populations in experimental conditions, with few having been conducted with Chinese students. How Chinese international students may change their self-efficacy and mindsets after the exposure to both Chinese and UK cultures of learning may offer new explanations for their learning experiences.

3.8 Conclusion

According to the 3P model (Biggs et al., 2001), students’ learning outcomes are dependent upon the interactions between their individual factors, the teaching context and their ongoing approaches to learning. The situation can be further complicated in an English as a second language environment where students may have to cope with many possible academic challenges arising from differing cultures of learning.

Studies on Chinese international students’ learning experiences tend to follow a large culture view to provide generalisations about Chinese students as a cultural group with deficits or surpluses. This leaves the questions of what individual students have coped with their studies, and the variations in their academic coping and learning outcomes. A review of the relevant theories suggest that students’ academic coping, mindsets, self-efficacy and goal pursuits may all interfere in the learning process,
affecting their approaches to learning and hence learning outcomes. A longitudinal qualitative study to explore the dynamic interactions between the individual, cultural and cultural factors that impact individual students’ learning will be able to provide answers to these questions.
Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will first introduce the research questions. Then, I will clarify my stance as a researcher before I outline the argument for progressing with a qualitative methodology. Next, I will outline the research background in which the participants found themselves. This is followed by explanations of the research design, the implementation of data collection, the analysis and write-up to demonstrate the efforts made to ensure trustworthiness to ensure trustworthiness. Finally, I will also discuss some ethical issues arising from this research.

4.2 Research questions

As discussed in Chapter 3, Chinese international students tend to encounter academic challenges while studying in English-speaking countries due to their language competence and conceptions of learning. However, much focus seems to have been on how their Chinese cultural values and educational practices impact international Chinese students as a cultural group, with few comprehensive studies focusing on individual variations during the coping process, which can be attributed to their self-beliefs as well as the cultural and educational influences. A longitudinal qualitative approach featuring interviews and observations are able to identify the variation in individual developmental stages and to answer the research questions, which include:

Q1. What are the main academic difficulties experienced by the Chinese international students and how do they cope with them?

Q2. Which specific academic coping strategies do they adopt?

Q3. What are the results of their coping?

Q4. What factors contribute to the adoption of certain academic coping strategies?

These questions guided the study of the four individual cases and the cross-case study that follows. The findings from the cross-case study will generate recommendations for UK universities to improve their services to help students to succeed in their across-cultural education.

4.3 My positioning as a researcher

Culture has been widely discussed and recognized as an important impact on all aspects of human behaviour (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006). As a Chinese international student and researcher studying Chinese international students, the ‘I’ may influence the way data were collected, analysed and reported. My cultural socialisation, as an undergraduate and post-graduate educated in China and later a teacher of English in Chinese universities means I understand the academic pressure Chinese students experience. The shared cultural values and beliefs with my participants enabled me to establish social
bonds with them and to gain their trust, an advantage that has been discussed in previous literature (Ganga & Scott, 2006; Miller & Glassner, 2011). The rapport obtained from this relationship also allowed me to enter their worlds and develop my understanding about not only their learning situation but also their self-belief. One participant told me that he joined the research because he felt he should “support” me as a compatriot as he knew how challenging it could be for me to do research in the UK, judging from his own learning experience. Similarly, as a cultural insider, I often found myself sympathetic in my interpretation of the participants’ challenges.

However, I was also aware of the gaps between us that made me an outsider of my participants’ world. Differences in age, social class, position in the HEI in which the research took place and life experiences all made it sometimes less likely for participants to share all of their stories with me. Whereas all of my participants were young (in their early 20s), and each was the only child from a middle-class family coming to the UK for their undergraduate study, I was of their parents’ generation, pursuing a PhD degree study and subsidizing my UK study through part-time teaching.

In some sense, there was ‘power asymmetry’ (Kvale, 2006) existing between the researcher and the participants. As Chinese students tend to be deferential to teachers, and see teachers as the authority in a higher position (Spencer-Oatey, 1997), my working as a part-time teacher might also have contributed to participants’ reluctance to share some issues with me. Indeed, some participants told me later that they had not elaborated on some details in the first two interviews just because of my teacher status even though I did not teach any of them. An extreme case of the impact of my dual role as teacher and researcher can be illustrated by a female participant who dropped out from the research after three interviews. I was later told by other participants that discussing the sensitive topic of plagiarism with them had led to her suspicions about my true research intentions. She spread the word that I was a ‘spy teacher’ acting on behalf of the University to identify students who cheated. Fortunately, despite this rumour, other participants continued to stay possibly due to the rapport established during the research and that they did not trust such a rumour.

4.4 The research setting
4.4.1 The teaching and learning environment

The research data were collected from a post-1992 university in the UK between 2012 and 2015. Located in southern England, the University cooperates with 15 Chinese universities and recruits approximately 1000 international Chinese students each academic year, which is an ideal site for studying Chinese students’ learning experiences in the UK.

The academic year is divided into two teaching blocks (TBs) and an assessment block by Christmas and Easter. September to Christmas is TB1; January to Easter is TB2. Easter to the end of June is the assessment block (after 2012), when students do not generally go to classes but get prepared for their
essays and exams via self-study. Students can email teachers for queries or arrange for individual tutorials if they have questions during the assessment block.

Relevant documents from the University indicate that at the time when I conducted the research, as a general guide, international students were required to obtain a minimum IELTS score of 5.5, with no component below 5.0 for Level 4 entry, and 5.5 with no component below 5.0 for Level 5 entry, although there were variations across different courses. Students who held a conditional offer from the University, but had not yet met the English language standard for entry could apply for one of the three pre-sessional English (PSE) courses: Programme 1 (P1) for IELTS scores 1 shortfall, Programme 2 (P2) for 0.5 shortfall. Additionally, Students who have met the standard entry requirement and hold a non-conditional offer could choose Programme 3 (P3) as a refresher course. The detailed requirements for the PSE courses prior to 2012 were as follows:

Table 4.1: IELTS score shortfalls and the PSE programme required (pre-2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Entry Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>12 weeks</td>
<td>1 IELTS band lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>0.5 IELTS band lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
<td>Refresher only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The PSE courses are run by the UK University under study, or a franchising Chinese university, or a franchise at a local private school. Approximately 200-250 Chinese international students join one of the three PSE programmes in the UK University each year. The aims of the PSE courses are to provide students with a range of academic skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and to help orient them towards future university level study via teaching and learning activities. Once demonstrating satisfactory completion of their PSE courses (passing the assessments), students can go straight to their course without repeating the IELTS test.

The University started ongoing English language support to international students after the PSE courses via an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) module as well one-to-one tuition from Academic Skills Unit (ASK) prior to 2012. Also, since 2011, Learning Support Tutors (LSTs) have provided one-to-one tuition to students, covering all aspects of academic English and study skills, such as time-management. LSTs periodically email all students encouraging them to make use of the service and individual language teachers may also refer students in need of one-to-one tutorials to LSTs. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that many students do not use these language supports.
There are also language-related units lasting throughout the three levels of undergraduate study: from Level 4 to Level 6. Depending on the level they are enrolled in, international students are required to take General English (GL) seminars at three levels, General Language Grade 4 (GL4) for Level 4, General language Grade 5(GL5) for Level 5, and General Language Grade 6 (GL6) for Level 6. Additional language units exist in some degree programmes, for example, some courses also offer Business Communications (BC): BC2 for Level 5 and BC3 for Level 6. Both types of seminars consist of an average of 12 to 20 students.

4.4.2 The cohort of Chinese international students

The majority of Chinese international students were studying for their undergraduate degrees at the University where the research was conducted in 2012. With the exception of a few, most were self-financing and on exchange programmes of 3+1, 2+2 or 1+3, which means that they had previously spent from one to three years studying subjects relevant to their UK degree courses in Tier Three or Tier Four Chinese universities after receiving low scores in gaokao (2.2). Their UK courses were concentrated in such areas as Business and Communications, Finance, Accounting and Marketing. Since Chinese undergraduate students tend to be concentrated in the core language-focused units, for example, GL and BC units, these units became ideal research sites to access the participants. Having introduced the research questions and the research background, I now explore the rational for the use of a qualitative methodology to explore the research questions.

4.5 Research design

The purpose of the study is to explore individual Chinese international academic coping and learning using both induction and deduction. Following the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) data is collected and coded, and is grouped based on thematic analysis. After the initial saturation is reached, a deductive process of using some related existing theories to search for new data continues the cycle until sufficient evidence is gathered to answer the research questions.

4.5.1 Rationale for a longitudinal exploratory qualitative case study

A longitudinal exploratory qualitative case study fits with the research purpose of exploring variations between individuals and the factoring leading to possible changes across time. The interpretation of individual students’ learning experience can be explored through qualitative methods such as interviews and observations rather than quantitative ones. In contrast to a quantitative study, where numbers in the form of statistical figures are used to explain phenomena, a qualitative study use words to describe patterns arising from analysis, allowing for in-depth understanding of a complex situation (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Furthermore, a longitudinal design is necessary to illustrate individual students’ changes over a period of time. Previous qualitative research into international
students’ learning experience uses retrospection by participants to elongate the data (Skyrme & White, 2011), which can also be used in this study.

Case study is selected due to its flexibility with multiple ethnography methods, making it possible to gather, analyse and report data for deep understanding (Luck, Jackson, & Usher, 2006). “Doing case study research means identifying a topic that lends itself to in-depth analysis in a natural context using multiple sources of information” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p.16). Also, according to Stake (1995, p.8), “(t)he real business of case study is particularization, not generalisation”. Case study fits with the purpose of the research aim, which is to identify individual students’ learning experiences.

Finally, a multi-case study involving four individual cases are designed. The idea is to achieve an in-depth discussion of individual students’ variations in coping and changes by comparing and contrasting the four cases. The ‘naturalistic generalizations’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) thus achieved help avoid the ‘large culture’ view of attributing students’ coping behaviour to Chinese culture by inviting the reader to see both the similarities and the differences. A multiple case study can help understand research phenomenon and support analytic generalisations through cross-case studies (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003) with both balance and variety.

After deciding on the research approach, I mapped out plans regarding the data collection, analysis and report through discussions with supervisors, although specific strategies also evolved as the research progressed.

4.5.2 Methods

Semi-structured interviews and class observations are designed as the main research methods for data collection. The combination of both would maximize objectivity in data collection while minimizing the limitations of each other.

4.5.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews have been recommended for case studies for their flexibility as a data collection tool (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Hancock and Algozzine (2006, p.40) summarize the distinctive features of semi-structured interviews:

> Semi-structured interviews are particularly well-suited for case study research. Using this approach, researchers ask predetermined but flexible worded questions, the answers to which provide tentative answers to the researchers’ questions…researchers using semi-structured interviews ask follow-up questions designed to probe more deeply issues of interest to interviewees.

Thus, this method allows for structuring the interview questions as a general guide beforehand, based on the previous interviews or observation data. I then extract further detailed questions depending on
the situation during the interviews, thus giving participants freedom to express and allowing deep exploration of the research issues.

However, the validity of the data via self-reports, i.e., interviews, can be undermined due to the possibility of ‘anecdotalism’ during the research, or research bias resulting from a few well-chosen examples provided by participants (Silverman, 2000). Validation from other sources are often recommended. In this case, I choose class observations to observe participants’ actual learning behaviour for triangulation.

4.5.2.2 Class observations

As an ethnographic tool, observations in natural settings have been regarded as “the most powerful source of validation” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p.389) because they can identify the “here-and-now experience in depth” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.273). Class observations maximised the opportunity to validate participants’ self-reports, and they also enhanced my understanding of the research context.

Class observations may not entirely resolve the issue of potential bias caused either by participants’ self-reports or by the researcher’s subjectivity as a cultural insider. As Angrosino (2005) argues, objective truth about a culture or a society cannot be established based on the researcher’s observations, because these observations and interpretations are still the researcher’s own knowledge. To minimize such subjectivity, I would adopt a ‘bricolage view’ in the research process: Being willing to construct the research methods according to the context, and being reactive to that context rather than using a fixed ‘reductionist’ method (Kincheloe, 2005).

4.6 Procedures for data collection

I now present the detailed procedures involved in the data collection. Most of the data were collected following the initial research design. However, there were some alterations regarding the procedural details as the research progressed.

4.6.1 Class observations

Before the formal class observations, I started with some preliminary ethnographic research (10/2012-11/2012) in order to familiarise myself with UK teaching and learning environment and to modify, develop and expand the research questions, where necessary. After obtaining a favourable opinion from the Research Ethics Committee of the University (Appendix 4), I contacted four teachers of the GL6 units, who allowed me to observe their four individual classes, over several sessions in TB2 (2012).

Stakes (2010) holds that the qualitative researcher should know, to see, to hear and to understand the research situation. As a participant-observer, I was able to gain my understanding of the teaching and learning contexts in which Chinese international students were exposed to. I took down notes, including
students’ classroom behaviour (their interactions with their teachers and peers, their language level and their concentration in class, etc.), the content of the lessons, the class atmosphere, the differences between Chinese and English classrooms. I also invited four Chinese volunteer students to talk about their experiences of a UK study. The preliminary class observations familiarised me with the contextual information and prepared me for the formal observation.

Formal class observations were conducted in TB2 (2013), after I gained consent from the respective teachers involved. These were further divided into two stages. As planned, the first stage (01/2013-3/2013) focused on language-related classes, i.e., GL5 and BC2 classes. I acted mostly as a non-participant observer, but occasionally also as a participant observer when explicitly invited by some language teachers to join in their class activities. The role of a non-participant observer helps to prevent the data from being ‘tainted’ because of the researcher’s participation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

With the experience gained from the preliminary study, I prepared an observation guide for the formal class observations, which included both general information such as time, place, teacher, participants, class type, the atmosphere, and the details that documented participants’ behaviour such as their willingness to participate, their use of Mandarin or English and their behaviour during group work. To minimize disruption, I did not utilize any recording devices but took quick notes instead. On occasions, there was insufficient time to note all details, which necessitated gap-filling (and reflections) immediately afterwards.

Participants’ academic challenges or interests in their subject areas necessitated the second stage of observations (10/2013-11/2013), when I observed participants’ language-related units (GL6/BC3) two to three times, as well as some of their subject-related units at least once. Participants expected my presence in their classrooms but they were not informed of the observation details. I was conscious of the fact that my presence might cause participants to behave differently. I therefore tried to minimize any possibility of interference by sitting a little distant from the participants. Indeed, both study participants and other classroom students seemed to be comfortable with my presence, perhaps due to habituation, evidence by the fact that several students, sometimes including the participants, would browse on their mobile phones or send text messages despite my presence.

I increasingly focused my observations on the selected participants, from the second round of observations onwards, as the research progressed and developed. Guided by the emerging data from each observation and interview, the observation notes formulated the basis for the subsequent interview questions. The more objective information gained from observations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006) also triangulated the interview data. For example, Zihao’s account of his Law lecturer’s language speed contradicted my classroom observation. The triangulation justified this alternative interpretation: It was Zihao’s learning strategy rather than the teacher’s language that caused difficulty in understanding the lecture (Chapter 5).
Class observations sometimes can be unproductive due to either the absence of the participants or difficulty in observing their behaviour from the distance in a traditional classroom layout. Achieving a balance between research needs and minimizing possible interruptions by the researcher could be a challenge for doing ethnography research.

4.6.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews provides the means to achieve the purpose of deducing conceptual categories from data to interpret the research phenomena. Interviews can “facilitate collecting rich data through probing questions and provide the opportunity for clarification and interpretation” (Stake, 2010, p.95), thereby obtaining information that observations alone cannot achieve. As “the major tool for generating focused data for developing abstract conceptual categories” (Charmaz, 2014, p.87), interviewing allowed me to focus on the directions of the research through iteratively collecting and coding data until the data saturation was reached.

Based on the experience gained from the initial ethnographical research via observations and informal talks with students and teachers, all formal interviews were semi-structured. A research guide was structured beforehand, but specific questions varied with the development of the research. Specifically, the first two rounds of the interviews were “informational interviewing” (Charmaz, 2014, p.57) to establish rapport and to obtain background information such as participants’ courses, their motivation to study in the UK, and their previous education. From the third round of interviews, however, the interview questions were more theme-driven. This was because by this stage, the initial coding from the data collected allowed for a more sharpened research focus. Consequently, the subsequent interviews were either reactive to each participant’s answers or were directed by the research direction, varying in order and depth depending on each participant’s real situations. For example, Dan and Zihao studied alongside home students, whereas Wei and Ting did not. Accordingly, Dan’s and Zihao’s interview questions involved how their relationships with home students affected their learning, and Wei’s and Ting’s involved how experiential learning from outside class shaped their learning. In general, however, the interview questions followed a hierarchical focusing strategy suggested by Tomlinson (1989), that is, to start with more general questions and continue with more specific ones, to probe for the underlying reasons for individuals’ unique coping strategies.

The four to six interviews with each participant spread over three stages (01/2013—05/2014) (Table 4.2). Each interview during the first two stages was generally followed some class observations, but the third stage involved no observations. Also, I interviewed Wei fewer times than the others. This is because I was able to obtain sufficient data through our frequent informal talks, which I noted down immediately after each meeting (Appendix 2).
Grateful for students’ devoting their time to my research, I chose the time and the location convenient to them for their interviews. Interviews were held in places that were safe, quiet and convenient for the students: a pre-booked seminar room, a lecture theatre or a library group study room. Although originally designed for 30 minutes to avoid possible fatigue for the participants, some interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes as students were willing to share more stories with me.

To ensure accuracy, completeness and full understanding of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), both audio and audio recordings were used. I initially used audio recording hoping to catch details of the participants. However, I found that some participants did not feel comfortable facing the camera after the second round of interviews and therefore, I used the video recording only as a verbal record rather than for the non-verbal aspects of the interviews. Students were given the choice of speaking in either English or Chinese during the formal interview as I found students had different preferences for the

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### Table 4.2: Class observations and interviews of the four selected participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Data collection methods</th>
<th>1st Stage (01/2013-03/2013)</th>
<th>2nd Stage (10/2013-11/2013)</th>
<th>3rd Stage (01/2014-05/2014)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zihao</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>GL5: 5 times</td>
<td>1.GL5: 2 times</td>
<td></td>
<td>8 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Company Law: 1 time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>2 times</td>
<td>1 time</td>
<td>3 times</td>
<td>6 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ting</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>GL5: 6 times</td>
<td>1.GL6: 2 times</td>
<td></td>
<td>10 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.BC3: 1 time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.Payment and Law: 1 time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>2 times</td>
<td>1 time</td>
<td>3 times</td>
<td>5 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>GL5: 3 times</td>
<td>1.GL6: 2 times</td>
<td></td>
<td>11 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.BC3: 2 times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.British Culture: 4 times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>2 times</td>
<td>1 time</td>
<td>1 time</td>
<td>4 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>GL5: 5 times</td>
<td>1.BC3: 1 time</td>
<td></td>
<td>9 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.Communications Theory: 3 times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.Translation Theory and Practice: 1 time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>2 times</td>
<td>1 time</td>
<td>2 times</td>
<td>5 times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interview language. Some students (e.g., Zihao) preferred to utilise the opportunity to practise their spoken English in their first two rounds, but switched to Chinese later on, as they thought they could express themselves better using their native Chinese language. Some participants, such as Dan, preferred to use only Chinese from the beginning. Still others (e.g., a male student not chosen for case studies) consistently used only English.

Each interview was conducted at a nearest possible date (two to ten days) after class observations to avoid possible memory loss. Since participants were asked to recall their experiences of Level 4 when they were already at Level 5 to elongate the data. On several occasions, I found apparent contradictory remarks by the participants when transcribing the data, in which case I triangulated the data by asking the questions at a later interview to seek clarification or by seeking alternative interpretations other sources. Although similar contradictory remarks might raise the concern for plausibility, they sometimes led to new interpretations about participants’ behaviour. For example, Dan presented her GL6 class as “the most boring” and her BC 3 teacher as “fussy” in the interview (DI.3), which contradicted my observational notes. Such contradictions also led me to explore her motives in depth, which confirmed my assertion that her remarks suggested a strategy for self-protection, typical of students holding a fixed mindset when they encounter setbacks. This interpretation gives further evidence to my argumentation about Dan’s mindset.

4.6.3 Other means of data collection

I collected data using a flexible approach during the research following a ‘bricolage view’ (Kincheloe, 2005). For example, as the research progressed, I found students preferred emails, online chatting, and informal talks. Ensuring that participants that the data gathered was secure, I was able to gather data via these flexible channels, allowing me to understand issues that participants might have been reluctant to discuss via recorded or face to face interviews, for example, academic cheating.

Additionally, I also sought other means of data collection for triangulation purposes. For example, I initially gathered contextual data from the LSTs concerned and also some teachers regarding some generic academic issues. After they had completed their courses, I also discussed with some unit teachers some participants’ academic behaviour. The delayed effort was to protect the participants and to avoid any potential tainting of the data gathered, should the teachers intervene the participants’ learning as a response to our discussions. Finally, after they had completed their courses in 2015, I also accessed students’ course transcripts after gaining their permission via email.

4.7 Data transcription and translation

The original data were recorded in both English and Chinese, which means that transcription and translation were both involved during the transcription.
4.7.1 Denaturalized transcription

I transcribed the interviews conducted in English using denaturalized transcription practice. In contrast to naturalism transcription practice, where details of every utterance are transcribed, denaturalized transcription removes “idiosyncratic elements of speech (e.g., stutters, pauses, nonverbal, involuntary vocalizations)” (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005, pp.1273-1274). “Transcriptions are by definition incomplete, partial, and selective” (Riessman, 2006, p.29), as choices are made based on the research purpose and objective (Lapadat, 2000). Since identifying the accuracy of meaning contained in the participants’ words was my concern, denaturalized transcription fitted with this purpose.

The transcripts used for member checking, coding and analysis were all edited. This is because, removing the hesitations, pauses, gestures, and wrong lexicon prevents obscuring of the meaning intended by the participants and is thus reader-friendly. Moreover, given that English was the participants’ second language, editing their English interviews also became necessary for ethical reasons. One participant did remark that she felt embarrassed finding the initial unpolished transcripts contained so many grammatical errors. Oliver et al. (2005, p.1286) suggest that “for participants engaging in member checking, naturalized transcription could be seen as disrespectful if the participant would have written the words differently or perceived their grammar more accurately than portrayed in naturalized text.” Sensitive to participants’ reaction, I subsequently removed all grammatical errors while also retaining much of the original feature (e.g., using a phrase instead of a sentence).

4.7.2 Translation

As a bilingual speaker myself, I translated all the audio/video interviews conducted in Chinese into English. To ensure the quality of the transcripts, I back translated all the recorded data used for case studies. As with transcription, my primary focus was on the content, so I retained most of the individual styles. For example, as a Law student, Zihao talked with logic and his language contained many connective words, which I faithfully translated. By contrast, Ting tended to use shorter sentences, and I translated accordingly.

4.8 Data analysis

4.8.1 Data analysis procedure

To establish a theoretical framework to interpret Chinese international students’ academic coping, initial data analysis immediately followed each data transcription/translation. After an iterative process of data coding and theme identification, I used a thematic network to establish the hierarchical orders of these themes. The process involved a combination of grounded theory for data-coding and thematic analysis for theme-building (Table 4.3).
Table 4.3: Data analysis procedure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods Used</th>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>1. Familiaring data through denaturalized transcription</td>
<td>Transcribe/translate the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Open coding</td>
<td>Code paragraph by paragraph, identifying categories, properties and dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Focused data coding</td>
<td>Compare data and focus on key codes relevant for research questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
<td>4. Identifying themes</td>
<td>Abstract themes from focused codes and tabulate text extracts for each participant (Appendix 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Constructing a thematic network</td>
<td>Integrating the themes into a framework, checking for consistency of evidence across the entire data set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Defining and refining themes</td>
<td>Recursive process of defining and redefining themes based on new data and insights until saturation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Interpreting patterns</td>
<td>Writing up a coherent story</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on Aucttride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994

4.8.2 Coding

More specifically, the coding process (initial coding and theoretical coding, Appendix 1) followed the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). I was interested in what had happened to the participants during the initial coding, so the codes could vary for each participant. The earlier codes also directed the subsequent interviews and theory searching. I simultaneously coded all the field notes and observations using consistent codes for similar concepts. Then the codes for the same participant were compared across time to explore changes, and also provide comparison between participants to identify similarities and differences. This helped to select competing codes, and those with “more theoretical reach, direction, and centrality” (Charmaz, 2014, p.141), which were elevated to the focused codes and subsequently forming the basis for the themes.

4.8.3 Building a thematic network

In elevating the focused codes into themes, I followed thematic analysis method “for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). After recursive
coding and constant comparison between the data collected, clear patterns of students’ challenges and their copying strategies started to emerge. Some of the focused codes such as relationships with home students, language issues, and dealing with examinations became emerging themes. I tabulated the data based on the emerging themes (language issues, essay writing, integration, self-regulation, approaches to learning, etc.).

By this stage, I felt that themes derived from ‘bottom-up’ methods recommended by grounded theory were sufficient to answer the “what” and “how” research questions. However, I was still quite puzzled over how to answer the “why” question, which were essential to the building of a theoretical framework. At this stage, I started to use a deductive method, namely, using theories to guide the data coding process. Strong evidence from the literature suggests that students’ self-beliefs impact their academic coping processes and the learning outcomes (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), which appeared to explain the differences in participants’ mindsets and self-efficacy very well. These two concepts were used for a reassessment of the previous data, and directed subsequent data collection until I felt that there was sufficient evidence to justify how mindsets and self-efficacy influenced participants’ learning process.

Having identified these themes relevant to the discussions, I managed to build a framework to link the different themes together directed by the research questions. After several revisions, the final framework incorporated the three key influences from the individual, the educational and the cultural factors into one coherent system to illustrate Chinese students’ learning experiences.

4.9 Participant selection

The selection of the final four participants for case studies underwent two stages: The initial sampling and the final selection. Purposeful and theoretical sampling strategies (Coyne, 1997) were used at different stages of the research.

4.9.1 The initial sampling

Given the longitudinal nature of the study, the criteria for the participants’ participation were: Mainland Chinese students at undergraduate level studying their courses at the University for at least two years. I recruited 23 participants in early 2013, after observing GL5 or BC2 classes twice.

After discussing with my supervisors, I interviewed more participants than were actually required at each stage due to the possibility of participant withdrawals in this longitudinal research. Indeed, two withdrawals occurred after two rounds of interviews. One was the female student, mentioned previously, withdrew because she mistakenly believed that I was a ‘teacher spy’. Her data suggested that she could have been an exemplar for discussing Chinese students’ how social goals impact their learning. The other was a male student, who had spoken of the enormous pressure he was under because of his parent’s insistence that he obtain a university degree, which was contrary to his own wishes. I believe that he
regretted sharing this personal family information with me, and hence forward refused to have any further contacts with me.

There were also times when I had to exclude some participants due to unforeseen circumstances. A female student, for example, came to the UK university with high language competence (an overall IELTS score of 7.5) and experienced very few academic difficulties. However, she suffered from the conflicts between her personal and her social goals to the point that she found herself unable to cope with the stresses of normal student life. I had to make the ethical decision to end my research with her and suggested that she seek support from the university professional wellbeing service. These examples indicate that due to the longitudinal nature of research, researchers need to take slow steps in willowing. Although time-consuming, the prolonged process can also potentially prevent any possible disruptions due to participants’ withdrawals.

4.9.2 Final selection

Following Robson (2011), I selected the participants based on ‘typicality’ or ‘interest’, measured by their willingness and interest in the research, and their ability to articulate their ideas after two interviews. These criteria allowed me to gradually narrow down the participants’ numbers from 21 to 16 and then 13 and eventually 6.

In deciding on the final four cases, I further considered Stake (2006), who suggests that there should be ‘typicality’, ‘variety’ and ‘uniqueness’ in the individual cases in multiple case studies. While the demographic criteria were easy to identify, incorporating their mindsets and approaches to learning into the criteria for selection did not become quite clear until the third interview was complete. By selecting Zihao, Ting, Dan and Wei (all pseudonyms), I achieved balance and variety in both thematic matters and related demographic information (Table 4.4 below):

Table 4.4: Information for the final four selected participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of UK study</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>IELTS Score</th>
<th>Apparent Mindset</th>
<th>Main Approach to Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zihao</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Law with Business Communication (LWBC)</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Surface to deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ting</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA (Hons) International Trade &amp; Business Communication (ITBC)</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>BA (Hons) International Trade &amp; Business Communication (ITBC)</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Surface to deep</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ting and Wei were chosen because they both came with relatively low language competence and their experiences might provide insight into how international students overcome their language barrier and interpret their integration experiences. Zihao was chosen to compare with Dan, both of whom were studying alongside home students, and therefore, their learning experiences could provide different perspectives within a similar context to interpret international students’ academic coping experiences.

The themes emerging from the data analysis made theoretical sampling of the participants necessary. As the research progressed, participants’ self-efficacy, mindset and approaches to learning became increasingly eminent, which lent further credibility to the final selection. Accordingly, Dan’s holding a similar fixed mindset was chosen to form a contrast to the other three students who displayed largely a growth mindset.

4.10 Writing up

Although I continuously wrote parts of the thesis as soon as the data were analysed, I found reporting the findings with reference to the literature in an engaging way challenging. The process of iteratively testing and confirming my own assertions sometimes halted progress; however, by consulting relevant literature and seeking supervisors’ guidance, I achieved ‘naturalistic generalisations’ (Stake, 1995) via ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2003).

4.10.1 Thick description

Geertz (1973) asserts that the aim of qualitative research should be ‘thick description’, which helps create the ‘vicarious experience’ for the reader to experience the situation or the context that the participants are exposed to. Thanks to “the researcher’s task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behaviour) within its particular context” (Ponterotto, 2006, p.543), the reader can “cognitively and emotively “place” themselves within the research context” (Ponterotto, 2006, p.543). In this way, thick description enables ‘transferability judgements’ on the part of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.214). Instances of the use of thick description in this study include the detailed portrayals of a typical class in each individual case studies, as well as in the descriptions and analyses of participants’ remarks and the details of their changes.

The descriptive part relatively appeared relatively easy with detailed observation notes. However, the challenge came with the analytical part. Undertaking this task for the first time, I lopsidedly filled the first draft of Zihao’s story with data descriptions and few interpretations, which left my supervisors
unconvinced despite what I thought was ‘rich description’ in my writing. Suggestions from supervisors, together with readings of relevant literature allowed me to address this by using ‘juxtaposition’ (Chenail, 1995), which was to juxtapose the analysis with the narrative to create rhythm, or “a recognizable pattern throughout the Analysis or Findings section” (Chenail, p.5).

4.10.2 Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis as a strategy to interweave the narrative (telling the participants’ stories) and the analysis (interpreting their behaviour) helps to create the rhythm of a qualitative work. During the “intersubjective process of sense-making between two agents, a teller and a reader” (Popova, 2014, p.1), narrative analysis helps to achieve the purpose of ‘naturalistic generalisation’ in case studies (Stake, 1995). In this case, I used the participant as a first-person narrator to tell their own backgrounds to allow their voices to be heard.

I arranged the structure of individual case studies (Chapters 5-8) following a similar order: (1) Participants’ background (previous education, purpose of UK study, influences from significant others, i.e., their parents and teachers, and English levels); (2) a chronological re-presentation (thick description and interpretation) of their UK learning experiences from Level 4/Level 5 to Level 6, with emphasis on their changes, and (3) the final discussion that synthesizes the findings and answers the research questions. Likewise, the cross-case compared the similarities and differences between individuals, and discussed the general findings.

The evolving nature of the qualitative research necessitates persistence and perseverance in re-visiting the data (sometimes even listening to the original recording if in doubt) and revising the draft. In those circumstances, self-reflexivity appears to be essential to ensure the quality of the research.

4.10.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity means “the active construction of interpretations of experiences in the field and a questioning of how these interpretations arise” (Bott, 2010, p.160). Patton (2002, p.65) also argues that “reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspective and voice as well as the perspectives and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports”. Reflexivity was crucial in analysing and reporting findings to overcome my personal bias due to cultural familiarity. As a cultural insider, I sometimes took for granted information which a cultural outsider would have explored further out of curiosity. An example was Dan’s first draft. I reported that “she had expected her course to be similar to teaching training in China”. I did not clarify with her what this meant, assuming she meant a focus on English grammar (which turned out to be true), forgetting that the reader might not have the knowledge that I did.
Peer checking could effectively reduce such tendencies in doing cross-cultural research. As cultural outsiders, peers from outside Chinese culture were able to see what I had overlooked. My awareness of the potential traps from a large culture view also helped. The data findings from the research constantly reminded me of these questions: Have I been open to observing students as individuals rather than as a homogenous Chinese group? Have I gathered sufficient evidence to interpret their behaviour? By seeing students as individuals, I was able to understand, interpret and report their learning experiences more faithfully.

4.11 Trustworthiness

The design was approved by the faculty research ethics committee before I started to collect the data. Throughout the research process, I tried to maintain ‘trustworthiness’, which Lincoln & Guba (1985; 1986) equate to the ‘rigour’ in qualitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985; 1986) further listed four criteria to replace the old ones in representing rigour: ‘Credibility’ is used as internal validity, ‘transferability’ as external validity, ‘dependability’ as reliability and ‘confirmability’ as objectivity. These criteria guided each step of the research, including data collection, analysis and report.

Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The longitudinal nature of the study allowed me to gather sufficient evidence through multiple data collection methods, to interpret the cases from multiple perspectives and to report them via thick description.

While generalizability was not always possible due to the small sample, I strived for transferability by providing information about myself as well as the research context, processes and participants to allow for naturalistic generalisations (Stake, 1995). To achieve confirmability, I employed the data triangulation strategies proposed by Patton (2002). I repeatedly tested the assertions via regular discussions with my supervisors and other researchers, as well as referencing different strands of literature (e.g., culture, education, sociology and psychology). I used member check to enhance the credibility. While not all participants were enthusiastic about reading the drafts, some who did provided insightful suggestions. For example, Zihao’s comments on the first draft enhanced the assertion that over-reliance on teachers in China had influenced his expectations of UK teachers, which in turn helped to strengthen my argument that the Chinese students’ past education influenced their UK education.

Finally, to achieve dependability, I kept an audit trail of the research process, from data collection, analysis to data report. I repeated checked consistency in the data from different sources. I self-reflected and discussed with the supervisors to minimise subjectivity (Appendix 3).

As with quality, ethics was also a serious concern during the research. The unexpected incidents in dealing with human behaviour meant that flexibility was also required, which I will discuss now.
4.12 Ethical considerations

Throughout the research process, every effort was made to uphold research ethics. First of all, participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary. The participant information sheet explained explicitly the purpose and the duration of my research, participants’ right to withdraw from the research, my guarantee to destroy all audio recordings once the research was completed, their permission for me to obtain their academic transcripts from the University and to discuss with teachers for triangulation purposes. Furthermore, anonymity was maintained throughout the research process, including the process of transcription, analysis and final report. Additionally, I have never discussed the participants’ real names with others except for the supervisors and the interview transcripts were password protected and kept with the researcher.

As a researcher, I was aware of an ethic of care that “recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). Since this longitudinal study involved effort and time on the part of the participants, the interview schedule and duration were carefully designed to avoid conflicts with the students’ assessment period and possible fatigue.

Moreover, as a teacher, I was aware of “nurturing the well-being of others while seeking knowledge and understanding” (Wyatt, 2011, p.7) and was always happy to help the participants in need. Using my professional knowledge, I gave students suggestions on how to improve their English learning and essay writing skills as well as on where to seek professional help.

There were also moments of ethical dilemma regarding relationships with the participants as a cultural insider. As the research progressed, the relationship between me and some participants also changed, becoming what Eide and Kahn (2008, p.201) call “dependence by participants on the continued social engagement of the researcher in a relationship that initially commenced with research-only intentions.” For example, one participant, whom I did not include in the final case study, asked me to improve his BC3 essays, a unit which I happened to be teaching at that time. Conscious that my interference would affect his marks, I politely declined, explaining to him that it was against the rule as a University tutor. I could tell that he was hurt by my refusal as he became less engaged in his future interviews. It was likely that by this stage, he regarded me as an ‘in-group’ member. Under the influence of a collectivist culture such as China, in-group members including families and friends should value relationships more than tasks (Hofstede, 2011) and therefore, I could have helped as a compatriot, implicitly if not explicitly. As an area of “some contention and diversity of opinion” (Eide & Kahn, 2008, p. 206), the researcher-participant relationships may continue to be challenging qualitative research, which tests the researcher’s academic integrity.
4.13 Summary

In this chapter, I provided the research contexts, clarified my choice of participants and the methods I used during the research. I also illustrated the procedures of the research and listed the challenges and solutions to ensure the research quality. I will now present four individual cases studies following the principles mentioned above.
Chapter 5  Zihao’s transformation

5.1 Introduction

I met Zihao when I was observing his GL5 class in January 2013. He was at Level 5, his first year at the UK university. Both his seemingly careless manner in this language class and his distinctive appearance attracted my attention from the start. With a pair of white-rimmed glasses over a chubby face and a short quiff hairstyle, he displayed some uniqueness that Chinese Post-1990 generation love to demonstrate (Song & Lee, 2012). One of the few Chinese students studying law in a class where the majority were British home students, Zihao encountered academic setbacks, but he learned to adjust himself through trial and error during his two-year study in the UK (2012-2014).

I observed Zihao eight times and interviewed him six times between January 2013 and January 2015 (Appendix 2). His willingness to share his stories and his articulated manner allowed me to explore how in depth he overcame his low academic self-efficacy, changed his coping strategies and transformed himself into a deep learner. Following a chronological order, I will describe his development using ‘thick description’, which are divided into three distinctive periods: (1) Level 5, (2) Teaching Block 1 (TB1) at Level 6, and (3) Teaching Block 2 (TB 2) at Level 6. I seek to answer three research questions:

Q1. What academic difficulties did he experience and how did he cope with them?
Q2. What changes did he make and why?
Q3. How did Chinese culture influence his academic coping and learning?

As Zihao’s previous Chinese education bears a close relationship with his later UK academic learning (I.1; I.3; I.5), I will adopt the first-person narrative technique in the hope that this may create less distance between Zihao and the reader than if told by myself as a third person.

5.2 Zihao’s background

I took gaokao in 2010, but obtained a score only good enough for a Tier Three university in China. My parents were disappointed, so they paid for me to enrol in a 2+2 programme at Beijing X University to study English and Law in 2010 as I had always dreamed of becoming a lawyer since I was young (ZI.1). My mother was very strict with my study. She arranged for me to share a flat with a university teacher to stay away from peers living in the student hall. Some of them just killed their time by staying at the Internet café and smoking all the time (ZI.5).

I learned English and Law in the two years (I.1; I.3; I.5) All Law units were taught by Chinese teachers in lectures. I did not like them because lecturers just talked endlessly about knowledge from books and the students just copied teachers’ PowerPoint slides, which were always detailed. There were no discussions or questions requiring individual opinions. Passing the examinations was not that difficult
either. They involved right or wrong answers, or answering simple essay questions, with no discussions or tasks requiring our own views or our own understanding. Teachers highlighted the important points to be tested in class so we just tried to memorise those points (ZI.1; ZI.4; ZI.5). English classes were slightly better. Sometimes teachers also asked us to answer simple questions. There was little homework except for one piece of writing in preparation for IELTS.

I think because I was one of the few male students on this course, my Personal Tutor paid special attention to me. I played sports most of the time, but I did not ignore my study either. I did not want to disappoint the teacher and managed to stay at the top of my class (ZI.5). My chief goal at the time was to pass IELTS to come to the UK for a degree (ZI.6).

I took IELTS twice in China between 2011 and 2012, and obtained a global score of 5.5 and 6 respectively. But in both attempts, my reading score was only 5, which was 0.5 lower than the minimum entry requirement. I found reading was the most difficult because I just could not read fast. Consequently, I had to attend an 8-week pre-sessional English (PSE) course of a Chinese university which was collaborating with the UK University that I was applying to, from September 2012. The pre-sessional course involved listening, reading, speaking and writing. Some teachers graduated from this UK University. They taught us useful skills such as using references in essay writing, doing presentations, and recording lectures in case of being unable to keep up with the teacher in class (ZN. 6). Prior to my departure, I felt I had little to worry about except that if I could not follow the teachers from the start, then I would not be able to catch up or graduate with a degree (ZI.5).

Zihao’s academic self-efficacy in learning prior to his UK study appears to be strong. Zihao’s strong identification of his social goals may also help him persevere in his later UK studies. Still, there were concerns: His previous Chinese university education appeared to encourage ‘surface learning approaches’ (didactic teaching and rote learning). This contradicts the purposes of HE to equip students with analytical and independent study skills for them to understand, learn and apply (Entwistle & McCune, 2013). Also, there was justifications for his concern about the language issue despite the skills obtained from the PSE. The focus tends to be on generic language skills rather than specific subject knowledge, making it difficult to meet the needs of the students who are to study their subjects at an English-medium university (Chen, 2007; Evans & Morrison, 2011).

In September 2012, Zihao started his course entitled Law with Business and Communication. As its name suggests, the course consists of business communication (e.g., BC2 and BC3), law and language units (GL5 and GL6). Additionally, although not credited, Personal Law Tutorials were also listed on the timetable for all levels of students. Zihao was to learn language and business units with international students and law units with EU students and three other international students.
I now use the methodology discussed in Chapter 4 to present a chronological history of the three distinct periods of Zihao’s learning. A combination of narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973), give the reader an opportunity to act as a co-analyst, “tracing the evidentiary trail that led to the conclusions and raising alternative interpretations for discussion” (Moss et al., 1992, p.19).

5.3 An uneventful period of Level 5

I met Zihao in his GL5 class in January 2013. Sitting in the same row with him, I noticed that he was fixing his eyes on his iPad, but also occasionally contributed a couple of sentences. Could he be one of those Chinese students who were sent by their parents and therefore did not want to study, as recounted by some Chinese students and a few teachers who were teaching Chinese students at that time (ZN. 2)?

Fortunately, Zihao volunteered to join in the research so I was able to follow him to reveal the answer.

I will use ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) to present Zihao’s behaviour in his GL5 class.

5.3.1 A snapshot of Zihao in GL5 classes (ZO.1–16/01/2013)

The setting is a very small classroom situated on the fourth floor of a teaching building. Facing the door is the teacher’s desk with a computer on it in the left corner by big glass windows. The 16 seats are laid out in four rows in four columns, with an aisle in the middle just wide enough for one person to go through at a time. When all 14 students come in, including 12 Chinese, one Japanese and one Belgian student, the room looks really packed. The size of the classroom makes it difficult to do group work, as explained by the teacher before the lesson started. I sit in the aisle of the last row in order not to appear obtrusive. On my right are two female students and a male student who later I will come to know as Zihao and his classmates from the same course, sitting by the window.

Today’s topic is how to give instructions using imperative sentence structures. The example in the student handbook is how to make an English dish. Although the structure of the text appears to be simple, some Chinese students keep consulting the new words on their phones because of the many new words related to the English recipe.

The teacher seems to have fully anticipated the students’ difficulties. Using a slower than normal speed, she explains the vocabulary by using body language, making drawings on the white board and showing photographs through the visualizer.

Despite the teacher’s efforts, however, only a couple of students sitting in the first row are interacting enthusiastically with the teacher. Most of the students are taking notes silently. Several students sitting around me are obviously reading something else on their smart phones. Zihao’s eyes are fixed on his iPad most of the time, seemingly oblivious to what is going on in class. Occasionally, though, he shifts
his eyes back to the materials booklet, answers a question the teacher raises, then goes back to his iPad again.

The teacher has now moved onto the writing task - offering suggestions for a person who cannot sleep well at night, using imperative sentences. Zihao and his neighbours are obviously distracted - they are fiddling with their mobile phones and exchanging a few remarks in Chinese.

Zihao did not appear to be motivated in his GL5 class. He used his iPad most of the time, chatted with his neighbour in Chinese several times and wrote very little of what was required. His behaviour aroused my interest further and I continued to observe him in five GL5 lessons.

Zihao would sit nearest to the window in the last row with the same companions. His group appeared to be most interesting: Although they would attend every class, they appeared to be reading their iPads most of the time. Zihao told me that he used his iPad mainly for checking new vocabulary (Z1.1); however, from what I could see, Zihao and his group members were reading their iPads when the class were asked to do group discussions on several occasions (Z0.1; Z0.2; Z0.3).

Yet I also noticed that Zihao sometimes could be more focused. For example, the teacher asked the students to write in groups and Zihao was grouped with two male students, who appeared to be active in class. Zihao went immediately to the task and referred to the iPad for new words at times (Z0.5). Another instance was when two intern teachers were undertaking some demo teaching and Mrs X was sitting there observing. When asked to discuss their experiences of living in the UK, Zihao volunteered to talk about the constraints of entertainment for international students. He spoke clearly and fluently, without referring to notes as others did, which was surprising (Z0.6).

Disengaged most of the time, Zihao seemed to be confident in answering the questions (Z0.2) and his English appeared to be better than that of most of his Chinese classmates. It seemed to me that his complacency could have deterred him from making effort (ZN.2), and he later confirmed that this was the case:

The GL5 teacher is very kind. There is no pressure in her class. She speaks slowly and the lessons are easy. I can understand everything. Sometimes I have consulted the new words in the workbook before class, so there is little new to learn in class. Also, some of the lessons are a little boring. For example, how to cook a cheese omelette. We do not like English food, so I find it’s boring” (ZN.1).

The aims of the GL5 unit are “to develop student’s listening, speaking, writing and reading skills and confidence beyond the IELTS 5.5 level; to develop confidence in speaking and arguing in English in a variety of contexts; to develop language skills which will provided support for the workplace, whether in the UK or in an international working context”. Both the descriptor and the teaching suggested that the GL5 unit was guided by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which believes that language
learning is a social activity involving interactions with others and therefore teaching focuses on real world language use rather than preparation for examinations (Richards, 2006).

Failing to understand the communication function of his GL5 unit, which the teacher’s focus, Zihao formed the impression that it was too easy. His reaction was similar to the majority of the Chinese students that I had interviewed, who showed preference for conventionally grammar-based instructions to CLT. Clearly, there seemed to be a mismatch between teachers’ and students’ expectations. This echoes Brown (2009), which shows that students prefer grammar-based methods, whereas L2 teachers prefer the CLT in the classroom. Wei was possibly influenced by this under the influence of his previous Chinese education, where English teaching is still much dominated grammar-translation rather than CLT teaching (Bolton & Graddol, 2012).

5.3.2 Challenges in the law units

In contrast to GL5 language classes, where he appeared to be relaxed and enjoyed the company of his Chinese friends, the difficulty in understanding the law units and integrating with home students left him less efficacious: “Law lecturers speak very fast and use many strange words, so I am worried. If I cannot follow the teachers, I cannot pass the examinations” (ZI.1). However, his fear of failure seemed to be eased by the additional help from the University. His Personal Tutor arranged for a lecturer to offer a one-hour tutorial on a weekly basis to the only four international students; this lasted for half of TB1. During these extra sessions, the lecturer elaborated on what had been covered in the previous lectures and also gave students time to ask questions. Also, the Personal Tutor also asked the law seminar teachers to send the questions to be discussed in class beforehand to these four international students for their guidance (ZI.3; ZI.5; ZI.6).

Such university academic support aims to assist international students towards autonomous learning, which has been argued as necessary for them to make a smooth transition to the UK education system (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Indeed, Zihao reported managing to keep up with his lessons thanks to this extra tuition (ZI.3; ZI.6). However, as will be discussed, without addressing the fundamental problem—his conception of learning, such continual support may create a false impression on the students who tend to over-rely on teachers in their learning, which resulted in surface learning (Entwistle & McCune, 2004).

5.3.3 Challenges in integration

Although peer learning as an integral part of the autonomous learning can enhance learning through problem-solving, Zihao appeared to have been unable to benefit from this due to challenges in integration at Level 5. He reported having difficulty in integrating with home students due to what appeared to him, a lack of interest from them:
The first time when we met together, we could talk with each other and it was good. The tutor was there. He would tell us that we should be patient with each other during group work. So everyone was patient and friendly. But when we do group work in our free time, they are not. They speak really fast. Sometimes I do not know what they are talking about. We are not familiar with each other. Sometimes we do not know how to talk with each other, or how to improve the relationship. Sometimes I feel very embarrassed. I just sit there and say nothing (ZI.2).

Unable to get involved, Zihao seemed to have been reduced to a silent listener. His sense of alienation was exacerbated by what he considered to be some “unethical behaviour” of home students who did not appear at group discussion meetings several times (ZI.2). Becoming accepting of such situations, Zihao then became further detached from them, and felt relieved of the pressure from socialising with them:

If they do not come, I will not have to speak English to them and do not need to stay with them for a long time. I feel easier because I do not have to suffer from embarrassment any more (ZI.2).

Perceived isolation from home students due to culture, language and time constraints can lead to international students seeking comfort from their own compatriots in order to avoid shame, anxiety and fatigue caused by speaking English (Brown, L., 2009; Wright & Schartner, 2013). Therefore, Zihao reported discussing his law units with a few Chinese students who had come to the UK earlier to study law (ZI.2; ZI.3; ZI.6). To him, Chinese students were more “friendly and helpful” (ZI.1). Additionally, he could “convey his thoughts more easily using Chinese” (ZI.6). The lack of interaction with home students may have significantly reduced the opportunity for him to understand the UK educational conventions, knowledge which home students may have due to their socialisation. Indeed, his preparing for the UK law examinations by rote learning exemplifies this.

5.3.4 Coping with the examinations

Zihao’s fear of failure grew with the coming of his first UK assessment in late February 2013. Reporting feeling “really worried” (ZI.1), he resorted to mechanically memorisation, characteristic of a surface learning approach:

We need to answer 3 questions out of 7, analyse them and support them with our own ideas. We need to support each idea with two cases. So there are thousands of cases. They are too difficult to memorise (ZI.2).

The examinations clearly required analytical and critical thinking skills, a requirement that Zihao did not realise then. Overwhelmed by the immensity of the workload and with few coping strategies, he seemed to be temporarily losing his self-efficacy and resorting to emotion-focused coping, using procrastination and wishful thinking:
When I think about the exams, I tell myself I must prepare for them. But when I come across difficulties, I will just play and think maybe I will deal with them later (ZI.2).

His worries did not seem to undermine his motivation to learn and his self-efficacy in overcoming the difficulties and improving his learning in the new learning environment was evident:

*We can do group work and we can discuss problems, then maybe we will know how to deal with them. If still we do not know how, we can ask our teachers. We can find a way to solve them. I like this way of study here* (ZI.2).

Showing beliefs in solving the problems through strategies when faced with challenges could be signs of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). However, despite his awareness of opportunities to improve, Zihao did not appear to utilize them but resort to rote learning when pressurised by the imminence of the examinations, as demonstrated in his words:

*We just read them day by day until we can memorise them...But memorising thousands of cases proved such a daunting task because it is impossible to memorise them all, as there are just too many to memorise* (ZI.2).

Zihao’s approach to learning at Level 5 typifies surface learning, which contradicts the deep learning approach specified by his law course: “to develop and demonstrate essential legal problem-solving skills, such as identification of material facts, analysis of legal issues and application of law”. According to this specification, the assessments are designed to test students’ ability to understand and synthesize rather than merely remember. Failing to know this, Zihao continued to pursue a path of surface learning despite his display of signs of a growth mindset, suggesting that a misalignment between the course requirement and his purpose of learning.

Zihao had a strong belief in effort but he directed the effort towards mechanically memorising facts to pass the assessments, a surface learning strategy that had allowed him to pass the examinations in China successfully (ZI.4; ZI.5). This shows that students’ past learning experiences can affect their future learning (Biggs, 2012).

Chinese examinations tend to place more emphasis on memorisation of precise facts through effort, leading to rote learning in Chinese students (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Zihao’s belief in memorising facts (ZI.2; ZI.5) was later strengthened after he was confirmed by a Chinese student who started at the university a year earlier than him (ZI.5). The vicarious experience of others (Bandura, 1995) further convinced him that relent effort in memorisation can ensure academic success. He was only to realise the need for changing his conceptions of learning at Level 6, after he received the assessment results.
5.4 A turbulent period—TB1 at Level 6

There were five law units at Level 6 compared to three at Level 5. Given that Zihao’s challenges in the law units had already emerged at Level 5, whether he could change his approaches to studying and how this affected his learning process became the focus of my data collection. This was a period of anxiety, low self-efficacy, and low motivation for Zihao. He encountered various challenges in law-related units: his effort in rote learning turned futile, his discussions with Chinese students only proved ineffective; his goal of achieving a 2.1 degree appeared unattainable, all of which led to his extreme low self-efficacy. I will first provide a snapshot of his GL6 class observation in order to bring the vicarious experience to the reader.

5.4.1 Zihao’s behaviour in his GL 6 class

I observed Zihao’s GL6 class on a Monday afternoon between 4-6 pm. 19 students (17 of them were Chinese) were sitting in rows in a spacious classroom. Zihao was sitting alone by the window, and the two female students who used to be his companions in his GL5 classes were sitting behind him in the last row. “It is interesting that they should be sitting separately” (ZN.3). I thought and sat next to the two female students in order to observe Zihao better.

The lesson is designed to familiarise students with using references in academic writing. Activities in the first hour include the teacher himself providing the answers to homework for half an hour; students reading the text and finding the answers by themselves for 15 minutes; students reorganising sentences in groups and practising writing a short paragraph using references provided. During these activities, Zihao and a few students sitting in the front rows are taking down notes quietly, and others appear to be either fiddling with their mobile phones or staring at the books blankly.

Group work activities are planned after a short break for students to organise themselves. However, most students look bored and sit there motionless. Those in the last row continue to read from their mobile phones, averting their eyes to the booklet materials only once or twice when the teacher is approaching them to assess their progress.

Zihao turns back intending to work with the two female students, but they are too busy booking their flights for their Christmas holidays. He has to do the exercise alone. Although not uttering one word during the two-hour lesson, he is one of the only few students who have stayed concentrated. He follows the teacher’s instructions and completes his tasks efficiently for the teacher to check. He does use his iPad a few times, but clearly only for checking the vocabulary. Perhaps due to the timing of the class, which is almost at the end of the day, and also to the monotonous teaching style, the classroom atmosphere feels almost stagnant apart from the teachers’ occasional instructions: “Now, I want you to do...”
Now it is 6 pm. The class become instantly alive. Students are chatting as they walk toward the door. The male student sitting on my right asks me: “How could you stand such a lesson for two hours? We had to be here. But the two hours was just wasted!” “And he always comes late, and then checks assignments for half an hour! And then takes a break!” His friend echoes sarcastically (ZO.6).

The atmosphere in the second observation a week later was similar: There were very few teacher-student or peer-peer interactions and the class appeared rather lethargic. Nevertheless, Zihao chose to sit with a male student who appeared to be very motivated in class. He stayed focused throughout the lesson despite the fact that the majority of the class did not (ZO.8). Zihao’s behaviour amazed me and I scribbled down my thoughts: “Why is there such a sharp contrast between Level 5 and Level 6? Zihao must be pressured to work hard towards high scores for his master’s degree” (ZN.3). As will be illustrated shortly, Zihao confirmed my hypothesis in the third interview.

5.4.2 Facing an unattainable goal

Sitting opposite me, Zihao appeared to be in very low spirit. His face looked pensive, and his tone less cheerful. His untrimmed hair left me with the feeling that he was no longer in a mood to maintain his previous hair style. The sudden realisation that his goal was unattainable left him disconcerted and deflated.

“I am under lots of pressure… I have been extremely low since the new term started… There are so many law units but only one language unit,” he started. As his story unfolded, I began to understand his feelings of frustration. As a consequence of the compounded pressure from obtaining higher marks to realise his goal of entering a prestigious UK university for a Master’s degree, and his lack of strategies for improvement. Indeed, the contrast between his behaviour at Level 5 and at Level 6 indicates a decrease in his academic self-efficacy, as shown in Table 5.1.

Clearly, as the course became more subject-related at Level 6, Zihao’s overall academic self-efficacy was challenged. This was also accompanied by his diminishing hope of attaining his goal:

I had never known the differences between 2.1 and 2.2 until I was trying to apply for some prestigious UK universities for my Master’s course…. In order to meet the requirement, I have to get 60% for three units this year…. At first, I saw this as a goal to pursue…. But after these weeks, I found the difficulty is really beyond my expectations (ZL3; ZL4).
Table 5.1: Zihao’s behavioural differences between Level 5 and Level 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
<th>Level 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unit</strong></td>
<td>Language/ business-related: * BC3 * GL5 * Professional Communication for Business</td>
<td>Law-related: * Substantive Law of Tort * The English Legal System * Contract Law * Personal Law Tutorials (uncredited)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Law units</strong></td>
<td><strong>Law-related:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>* Company Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GL6</td>
<td>* Elements of Commercial and Consumer Law; * Public International Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reported being unable to follow the teacher (ZI.1-2)</td>
<td>* Employment Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concentrated, following the teacher throughout and undisturbed by the environment (ZO.7; ZI.9)</td>
<td>* Law Independent Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appeared to be focused but confused sometimes (ZO.7); reported being unable to keep up with the teacher (ZI.3)</td>
<td>* Personal Law Tutorials (uncredited)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviour observed in class</strong></td>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>GL6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appearing relaxed, unfocused (ZO.1-5)</td>
<td>Appeared to be focused but confused sometimes (ZO.7); reported being unable to keep up with the teacher (ZI.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reported being unable to follow the teacher (ZI.1-2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confident in obtaining a high score (ZI.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficult to understand the lessons; helpless in how to learn (ZI.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception of the units</strong></td>
<td>Language &amp; business units as easy (ZI.1; ZI.2)</td>
<td>Pressure alleviated by the extra tuition (ZI.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-efficacy</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slightly low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There seems to be a significant discrepancy between Zihao’s goal and his actual progress. Carver and Scheier (1990) suggest that when perceiving their rate of progress to be higher than the standard, individuals feel positive and confident because of the significant reduction in discrepancy. Otherwise, they experience negative emotions and doubt. With little hope of reducing the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality, Zihao became less self-efficacious in achieving his social goals. He began to doubt his learning strategies in learning the lectures and seminars.
5.4.3 Challenges in law lectures

At Level 6, Zihao found himself “lost” as to how to learn the law-related units without the extra sessions provided for the international students at Level 5:

I was not familiar with a lot of the specialised vocabulary used in law classes. When teachers used these new words, and combined and repeated them in several sentences, if I could not follow in the first sentence, I would be lost for the rest, especially when they talked fast (ZI.5).

In addition to this difficulty, Zihao felt both “bored” and “confused” because of the teaching by a new teacher of this unit, whom Zihao reported “keeping reading the course materials without any interactions with the students” (ZI.3), so he only took notes in class hoping to review them afterwards. The problem was that due to the “poor quality” of his notes, this strategy did not work:

In China teachers would repeat several times those important for us to take notes....UK Teachers speak very fast. Home students can catch up easily but I cannot.... There are many words missing in my notebook, so even though I check my notes after class, I cannot obtain much information (ZI.5).

Zihao reported discussing the content of the sessions with his Chinese classmates, but was dismayed to realise that their notes were no better than his (ZI.6). He complained that whereas if he were in China, his classmates could have helped to solve the problem, in the UK law course they could not fulfil this role:

In China, when we came across academic difficulties, we could discuss with those who studied well and exchange our notes ... so problems could be solved. But here, if I did not take down some notes, my Chinese classmates probably did not either. So even though we would discuss a problem together, we still could not fully understand it (ZI.6).

Zihao’s self-efficacy appeared to be weaker compared to Level 6. Both personal factors (a limited vocabulary and lack of listening strategy) and the teacher’s teaching could have contributed to his poor comprehension in lectures. In order to fully comprehend his situation, I observed a one-hour Employment Law lecture on 15th November 2013. The following observational note illustrates his worries and frustrations in the law lecture.

5.4.4 A snapshot of the Employment Law lecture

The lecture is given in a small lecture theatre with around 80 seats. At the front of the classroom is a PPT showing the main content of today’s lesson. Mr Y, a man in his mid-50s is chatting and laughing with a couple of home students sitting in the front row. The atmosphere is very lively. At a glance, the three Chinese female students sitting on one end of the lecture stand out among the overwhelming majority of EU students, many of whom also have their laptops in front of them.
Zihao is sitting alone by the window on his own, reading his hand-outs. I sit in the same row and chat with him before the class starts: “I see only four Chinese students including you”, I ask him. “There are eight from both this year and last year. Sometimes they skip classes” he replies. “What about you?” I also ask. “I attend all classes”, he confidently replied.

The lesson starts. The teacher outlines the focus for today’s class – the development of ‘grievance procedure’. The teacher explains a number of different law clauses with real-world examples. Although he uses many legal terms and a large vocabulary, for example, ‘garden leave’, ‘statutory right’, ‘transparency’, ‘ethical standard’, this does not appear to be a problem as he is able to illustrate key concepts by citing examples or using paraphrasing. Sometimes he also asks questions and pauses for students to think and answer. Apart from similar interactions, all one hears is the fast typing on the key boards by EU students.

Zihao’s eyes follow the teacher all the time. He sometimes appears to be matching what the teacher says with his hand-out and underlines some sentences. Occasionally, he writes down a few words on the margins of the hand-out. Once or twice, his facial expression betrays that he seems lost.

I look at the Chinese students sitting at the other end of the theatre. They listen but do not take notes most of the time. Are they intimidated by the fact that EU students can listen and take down notes at the same time whereas they cannot?

“‘Garden leave’ means that an employee goes home with pay... To simplify, he or she has the right to leave but not the right to work”. The teacher has concluded the lesson before I realise it (ZO.7).

I had little knowledge about UK employment law; however, I felt I could understand the lecture very well thanks to the teacher’s skilful delivery of the lesson, such as repeating the key messages and using familiar examples. “How did you like the lecture”? I asked Zihao after the lecture. “I could understand about 50% of it if I concentrated on it. There was too much vocabulary. Sometimes the lecturer had moved on when I was still trying to figure out the meaning of a word” (ZN.3).

Although I had assumed that a law lecture at this level could be challenging for international students if they did not have a large technical vocabulary, the revelation that he could understand only half of lecture surprised me. Certainly, specialist vocabulary can be problematic for international students entering an English-medium university in the first year (Evans & Morrison, 2011). However, Zihao’s lack of strategy in listening to lectures could have been an underlying reason. For example, his remarks as well as his classroom behaviour suggested that he would dwell exclusively on a few new words without trying to guess their meanings from the context and this may have limited comprehension of the lecture. All of the law units are composed of two parts – lectures supported by seminars. Students learn key ideas and concepts in the lectures; and then they are supposed to do some reading and research.
to prepare for ‘structured seminar activities’ (Programme Specification, 2012). Without understanding the lectures, Zihao was likely to struggle in seminars.

5.4.5 Struggles with law seminars

Zihao’s surface approaches to learning took a heavy toll also in the seminars (ZI.3). His repeated poor performance in the seminars lowered his self-efficacy in learning, and even worse, his self-esteem. His subsequent self-defensive behaviour of avoiding facing the challenges also meant losing the opportunities for improvement. Three incidents at the law seminars (ZI.3; ZI.5; ZN.14) appear to have been particularly traumatic to him.

In one seminar, where the teacher “talked very fast”, he managed to answer a question “with confidence”, only to be told by the teacher that the question had just been discussed (ZI.5). Teased by his Chinese classmates afterwards, he felt so “embarrassed” that he gradually avoided answering any questions all together till the end of this unit (ZN. 14).

In another lecture, when the seminar teacher asked him to say something about a famous Chinese company, he was unable to answer. Feeling “very ashamed” for showing his ignorance about his own country, he began to dislike this seminar (ZN. 14), acting like his Chinese compatriots, who “just lowered their heads for fear being called to answer questions” (ZI.5).

His self-protection was probably an effort to avoid losing face. “Face is what a person feels about his or her image as it is seen through the eyes of others, of the person’s social group, community or a wider public” (Qi, 2011, p.288). Although the concept of face can be universal, it is particularly salient in Chinese culture (Ho, 1976). Whereas individuals have pride, satisfaction and confidence when gaining face, they feel ashamed when losing face (Redding & Ng, 1982). Accordingly, failing to answer the teacher in class could signify his incompetency, a face-threatening act to Zihao, and accordingly, keeping silent could be a self-protective strategy to avoid further face loss.

The last incident involved him giving a ready answer from the Internet in one seminar, which caused the teacher to “stare at” him, showing that she “could not understand” (ZI.3; ZI.5). Disappointed by his futile effort, he became defensive to avoid losing face:

_I spent some effort trying to find the answer, but the result was the teacher could not understand at all...so next time I will try to answer easier questions which have definite answers and try to answer less those involving personal views_ (ZI.3).

In an effort to avoid losing face, Zihao failed to identify the underlying problem, which was the apparent mismatch between his and the teacher’s expectations regarding the purposes of the seminar questions. Whereas the seminar teacher used the questions to engage the students in deep learning, which is investing effort in understanding the questions by ‘relating ideas’ and ‘using evidence’ (Entwistle,
2009), Zihao’s effort was clearly directed at surface learning. The fact that effort directed towards memorising facts and reproducing knowledge does not contribute to good understanding (Entwistle, 2009) means that his surface learning strategy of dealing with his law units would not work.

Group discussion at the seminar did not appear to be effective either. Reflecting on this, Zihao concluded that it was because “there is not much discussion” among the Chinese students. They preferred to sit in one group, and they “did very little work after class” (ZI.3). By contrast, Zihao felt EU students had “different views” because “they read more, prepared more and discussed more” (ZI.3; ZI.5). However, for lack of self-efficacy, Zihao could not take the initiative to join in with home students:

I think the problem is communication. First of all, the law course itself demands your personal opinions...so if I want to communicate with them, I do not know much about law; then I will have to think how to express myself. I have difficulty expressing myself in Chinese, and it becomes even harder to communicate in English....thus I have to think two things at the same time (ZI.3).

Students’ self-concept (how they see themselves) is formed by the educational setting, where students compare their self-perceived) skills with other students (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Likewise, Marsh (1987) pointed out that one’s self-concept varies with the ‘big-fish-little-pond effect’ (BFLPE) in academic settings. Whereas students feel more confident in ‘a small pond’, for example, a local college setting, they feel less confident if they are exposed to ‘a big pond’, for example, a city university. This BFLPE mirrors Zihao’s experience during this period. Whereas he felt competent academically in his small Chinese community, for example, in his GL5 and GL6 classes (ZI.3; ZI.6), he became less so in law units, where his self-efficacy seemed to be undermined when compared with home and EU students:

Comparing myself with Chinese students, I felt all right. But comparing myself with home students, I felt they had an advantage over me because of the language (ZI.5) ...In Law courses, there were only a couple of Chinese students, and the rest were all UK or EU students. Their English was much better. They also prepared better in discussions; they consulted many information sources and wrote as much as ten pages, so they could talk a lot. In contrast, we Chinese students could barely write a few sentences on the margins. So gradually we would just sit there silently. We sent psychological messages to ourselves: they are more able than us. This psychology made me feel that I was unable to understand even though I could have managed (ZN.9; ZI.5).

Zihao’s self-efficacy seems to be weakened by the inefficiency of his surface learning approach and also by social comparison. However, the unexpected outcomes appear to have been a double-edged sword for him: Frustrations about the ineffective coping strategies provided the opportunity for him to engage in self-reflections and finding the solutions.
5.4.6 Searching for solutions

“Although heavy focus on one’s failure is dispiriting, it can have beneficial effects if it identifies possible causes and suggests corrective changes”, argues Bandura (1991, p.253). Combining frustrations with self-reflection, Zihao persevered. He began to realize that high effort, a strategy that had allowed him to pass his Chinese university examinations with high marks (ZI.5; ZI.6) did not seem to work:

*The results of last year’s examinations were not satisfactory, especially in Law units. I barely achieved a pass mark in the unit assessments... I feel I have spent a lot more effort than others, but there wasn’t much difference in exam results... I just feel perhaps my method of studying Law is not appropriate. I did not feel my effort paid off (ZI.3).*

Attributing his poor performance to his study method rather than to his own lack of ability and demonstrating his continual faith in effort suggest a growth mindset. This growth mindset encouraged Zihao to seek out help from his personal tutor, who recommended that he attend workshops aimed at improving his study skills (ZI.3).

However, Zihao found the workshops were “aimed at a general audience and did not solve individuals’ problems” (ZI.3). Disappointed by the lack of a personalised style in these workshops, Zihao seemed to have lost confidence in his Personal Tutor, who did not seem to be so “warm-hearted” because of his referring students to other teachers by emails (ZI.3).

According to his self-report, Zihao also tried to read books to improve, but found it difficult to persist because of the vocabulary:

*I basically believe all problems are caused by language. If a book is in Chinese, then I can read it very fast and focus on the important parts. But for an English book, I get stuck by reading many new words, which I have to look up to understand their meaning... For home students, all they need to learn is law knowledge before they answer a question, but I have to check the meaning of words and understand the language first, before I can begin to understand the law and find the answers. So I have to spend twice as much time on a task. It is so time-consuming... Sometimes, I just did not have the time to spend on understanding word meaning: instead I just went online to look for answers” (ZI.3; ZI.5).*

Such ‘short-cut’ learning methods can lead students to surface learning strategies (Kember, 2004). Zihao’s limited specialist vocabulary in these Law units clearly prevented him from reading with efficiency, and hence the excuse for surface learning. A comparison of the vocabulary sizes between home students and international students may help to understand Zihao’s situation. According to the literature (Zimmerman & Schmitt, 2005), the vocabulary considered sufficiently large for native English speakers is 40,000 words whilst for non-native English speakers entering university it is 10,000
words. This vocabulary gap means that understanding of the text could be difficult for Zihao. The incompatibility between the pressure for high marks and a lack of learning strategy left him further doubting his social goal:

*I do not feel I have become totally involved in my study yet…. I find my goal of obtaining a 2.1 degree is getting more and more distant. I sometimes lack motivation and feel disheartened. I am beginning to doubt myself: Have I aimed too high? If I felt my goal was achievable, perhaps I could have a fixed plan to follow and carry out every day. But once I begin to doubt myself, most of my time is wasted on the doubt instead of focusing on my study (ZI.3).*

Zihao seems to have been caught in a vicious cycle: His low performance lowered his self-efficacy, and his lowered self-efficacy led to low academic motivation, which in turn led to negative-emotion coping. Faced with a diminishing goal yet unable to find alternative coping strategies, Zihao ruminated but was also desperate to find solutions.

5.5 A transformative period—TB2 at Level 6

It was February 2014, the last teaching block for Zihao’s undergraduate study. Remembering Zihao’s stress and frustrations during the third interview in TB1, I was still worried whether he would cope with the rest of his undergraduate studies successfully. The fourth interview conducted in TB2, however, proved that my worries were entirely unfounded (ZN.5). Zihao surprised me in this interview by his cheerfulness and assertiveness (ZN.5). The subsequent three interviews indicated that transformative changes were taking place. He began adopting a learning goal, became more self-efficacious, accompanied by his self-regulated and problem-focused learning and less emotional coping. There are four areas to illustrate his transformation, including making use of feedback, addressing academic issues, learning from home students, and preparing for the assessments.

5.5.1 Making use of feedback

Enhancing his understanding of the course by engaging in discussion with the subject teachers based on their feedback, mostly via email (ZI.5) in TB2 was catalytic to Zihao’s changes in his learning strategies. They started from his failure in his Research Proposal, which he did not expect:

*I thought it was good, but I failed. I was so worried…if I did not ask the teacher, I might fail the whole unit, let alone reach 2.1. I wanted to make a last try, even if the chance was slim… So I went to see the teacher after Christmas (ZI.5).*

Although his initial motivation to discuss with the teacher was from fear of failure, he realised from this experience that “*discussing with teachers is really helpful*” (ZI.4). He understood for the first time the fundamental problem with his essay writing:
Before discussing with them, I had read very little, and wrote essays based on my own thoughts. I just cited from law books the parts that I thought I needed and then put them together in my writing. But after discussions, I found that teachers pay attention to more details and reasons why (ZI.4).

Support from teachers in problem-based learning is beneficial especially when students are unable to complete a task on their own and teachers have the knowledge in the subject area (Schmidt, Rotgans, & Yew, 2011). Feeling supported, students will be more motivated to rise to challenges in their learning (Deci and Ryan, 2008). Having obtained guidance from the teacher, Zihao reportedly devoted more time and effort to reading and improving his essays (ZI.5). The effectiveness of these strategies was obvious: He obtained 63% for the Project Design, a high mark in a law course, which made him “very happy that the effort was recognized by the teacher” (ZI.5). This success led to his reported subsequent discussion with every subject teacher (ZI.4; ZI.5).

Zihao’s change of attitude towards feedback was a clear sign of deep learning. Although the University has made it a general practice to provide formative feedback along with a mark in virtually all forms of assessment, Zihao did not seem to value feedback until he had gained deeper understanding of the concept of learning. Our conversation in TB1 shows that his focus on surface learning had led to his negligence of teacher feedback in the past:

I: Is the feedback useful?

He: Feedback will be effective if it is given for drafts. Then I will improve so that I can get a higher mark next time. But for papers without drafts, I pay less attention to them. As I think after all, it’s over, the mark is decided and it may not be useful in the future (ZI.3).

By contrast, our conversion in TB2 saw Zihao focusing on feedback and building upon it to improve his learning, which indicates that deep learning was taking place:

I: Shall we discuss feedback? You did not seem to pay attention to feedback before.

He: In the past, sometimes I was too lazy to collect feedback...I thought that although the marks were not very satisfactory, I passed them all. But now I always collect it. I find it’s very useful to use teacher feedback to discuss with teachers, and to compare with classmates. If their scores are higher than mine, I try to see how they have done better. Teachers will write down our strengths and weaknesses, and also highlight incorrect grammar or points they could not understand (ZI.4).

Teacher feedback on students’ progress “will raise self-efficacy and motivation when it conveys that learners are competent and can continue to improve by working diligently” (Schunk, 2003, p.164). By using feedback for further discussion, clarification and reflection, Zihao appeared to have increased self-efficacy and had understood the significance of deep learning:
In the UK, teachers will just give you a rough direction, and then you will have to investigate and explore by yourself, and do your own research... I know I must understand what is involved in a case, and then decide what to select and what not to... It's a matter of time. If I spend more time, I see deeper. It's a process, but time-consuming. Sometimes when I was still trying to tackle a previous problem, other students had moved on to the next, so I lagged behind (ZI.4; ZI.5).

His identification with a learning goal, that learning is a time-consuming process involving critical reading, understanding and application marked the transition from surface to deep learning. The new concept of learning would guide him towards changes in learning strategies too.

5.5.2 Preparing for the assessments

Zihao’s change from his previous surface learning to strategic and deep learning approaches in TB2 Level 6 is clearly seen in his preparations for the examinations:

In a case analysis, I concluded the man was not guilty. Although the conclusion was totally different from the teacher’s..., I got a good mark as I had a clear deduction process. The teacher focused on my analysis.... Now I understand that what the teachers stress is not what is right, but the process of exploration. You need to write your thoughts step by step.... The results are not as important as the process—as long as you follow the steps, the results will not be wrong (ZI.4; ZI.5).

Professional help via feedback played a key role in facilitating Zihao’s dramatic change. Biggs, Kember and Leung (2001) argue that both the teachers’ instructions and the various forms of assessment feedback help shape students’ adoption of certain strategies and approaches to learning, which can be used here to interpret Zihao’s experience. Whereas assessments focusing on testing facts encourage surface learning, assessments focusing on critical thinking encourage deep learning in students. Under the influence of his previous Chinese education which focused on right or wrong answers, Zihao favoured surface learning at first (ZL.5). However, the rewards of the analytical process in his UK law course, however, motivated him to reflect on his personal tutor’s advice that teachers focused on “student voice” (ZI.5). Zihao summarised the ability to learn via deep understanding and analysis as “the biggest change” in his undergraduate study (ZI.5).

According to the literature, Chinese students tend to value effort and combine memorisation with understanding (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000). With the change towards deep and strategic approaches to learning, Zihao reportedly combined memorisation with understanding to prepare for the examinations:

I would write down the answers to the possible test questions and I would then memorise them... I read books and tried to understand them... In Law you are expected to memorise rules and regulations. However, unlike last year, when I mechanically memorised the cases, regulations and laws without thinking, this time I tried to understand everything while writing down the answers (ZI.5).
To Zihao, memorisation was also an effective strategic strategy for him to increase his efficiency during the examinations:

_Through memorisation, I could accelerate my writing during the exam. I did not have to organise the language in the examination, I could use better vocabulary, and I could write more insightful ideas. If I did not, I could never expect to finish the exam (ZI.5)._ 

Zihao also appeared to use strategic learning in order to achieve better examination results. Such students, as described by Entwistle and Entwistle (2003), focused on what they were to be tested on by seeking clues and rehearsing the most important topics. Zihao reported that he would narrow down the test scope by asking Chinese students who had been tested earlier or by seeking cues from the lecturers’ PowerPoint slides. Having done the ‘sifting work’, he would then focus on the subjects that were most likely to be tested, read literature on them, analysed them and understood them, before he memorised all the possible answers (ZI.5).

5.5.3 Improving learning strategies

With the change in his conception of learning, TB2 saw Zihao directing his effort via deep learning to address the academic issues that had previously been a hindrance to his Law studies. These include both language and essay writing.

Law lectures had always been problematic for him (ZI.1; ZI.3). Whereas at Level 5 he would record law lectures but “did not have the patience to listen” afterwards (ZI.1), at Level 6 he would use his iPad for video recording and would “watch it several times after class in order to grasp the essential information” (ZI.5). As learners need conceptual knowledge in their independent learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999), the understanding of the concepts in lectures was the first step for him to engage in further discussions that took place in seminars.

Specialist vocabulary had been his chief obstacle to learn the Law units (ZI.1- ZI.3). Compared with the past effort, when he found that he could not persist in memorising the vocabulary (ZI.3), he would now “summarize the vocabulary every day on a piece of paper and try to remember it” while doing his revision reading (ZI.4).

His metacognitive skills allowed him to reflect on his conceptions. This process further convinced him that better learning outcomes came from deep learning, which involved understanding through extensive reading. In contrast to TB1 (5.4.6), he now appeared to be self-efficacious in achieving this with his improved reading strategy:

_He: In China, you just memorise the answers and it’s enough to deal with the lesson. But here even if you memorise all the answers, in class the teachers will expand a lot, so you can still be lost._

_I: How do you manage to deal with this?_
He: Mainly through reading more books... There are many to read every day... I look at the contents and read only the relevant chapters. So in this way I reduce the workload.... As I read more, I can also identify what is more important and what is less so (ZI.4).

In line with the literature that deep learning leads to better academic outcomes when teaching and assessment are aligned (Biggs, 2003), the deep and strategic approaches to learning enabled Zihao to improve his academic performance. As indicated by his academic transcripts, whereas he obtained two low 40s and one 60s at Level 5, he achieved four 50s-60s and one 40s at Level 6 (Z.T.). A virtuous learning cycle was in evidence. With a learning goal, he actively sought strategies to improve his reading efficiency, which allowed him to read more books. Wider reading enabled him to achieve deeper understanding while enlarging his professional vocabulary, both of which helped increase his self-efficacy for reading, such that he reported that “it’s not so difficult to read books” (ZI.4). As self-efficacy acquired in one area can be extended to other areas (Bandura, 1993), Zihao’s self-efficacy in learning his subject area also motivated him to integrate with home students.

5.5.4 Learning from home students

In TB2, Zihao’s self-efficacy in socialising with home students was clear in his self-reports. He reported starting to join in seminar discussions with home students:

Chinese students would normally sit in the back row.... Whenever there was a home student in the same row, we would try to avoid sitting next to them because if the teacher arranged paired discussion.... We were worried that we could not understand them, and we could not express ourselves well. We would feel very embarrassed. But it’s OK with me and I would sit next to home students each time (ZI.5).

His change from Level 5’s staying away from home students (ZI.2) to Level 6’s engaging in discussion with them heightened his awareness of the differences between home students and some Chinese compatriots:

I discovered that Chinese students taking business courses would share their work with almost all other Chinese students. Sometimes they just copy each other without making any alteration or adding further contributions. By contrast, in Law courses, most students are non-Chinese. You have to be independent, and you cannot copy others... you have to have your own understanding (ZI.4).

This contrast motivated him to take his Master’s course in Law at the same university and avoid a subculture where Chinese students would only focus on achieving a degree rather than understanding the learning process:

When I began to apply for my Master’s course, I was thinking of changing from Law to Business... Later I found students in Law obtain an average mark in the 50s and only a couple of exceptional ones over 70. I realized that I was aiming too high.... Then I questioned if a Business course was really worth
its value... So I decided to continue with Law study and I also lowered my expectation of entering a famous university (ZI.4).

I could understand Zihao’s struggles over relinquishing his future goal of entering a prestigious university. As discussed previously (2.2.6), there has been a tendency for Chinese students to pursue business-oriented degrees and high scores to enter a Master’s programme at a prestigious UK university. Zihao must have cherished a similar dream under this cultural influence. However, obtaining a first or 2.1 class degree can be more difficult for Chinese than for EU and other Asian students (Iannelli & Huang, 2014), and could have been more so for Zihao, considering the few international students studying Law courses in the UK (Hou, Montgomery, & McDowell, 2014). Perhaps that was one of the causes for the alleged plagiarism among Zihao’s friends (ZI.4). By readjusting his expectations and becoming more realistic, Zihao was able to focus on his learning and identify more closely within his Law course:

Although I do not get high marks from my Law course, I understand what I have learned. I can explain some law cases more clearly and remember them for a long time and use them in future... I am thinking of working in a bank... I have noticed that Law students are also needed in a bank (ZI.4).

Zihao’s remarks such as ‘understand, explain and use’ of the knowledge and the fact that he was now paying less attention to high marks indicate his transformation from pursuit of a performance goal to pursuit of a learning goal, which was part of his personal growth via UK HE.

5.5.5 Gaining learning autonomy

With a learning goal, Zihao became increasingly appreciative of autonomous learning under teachers’ guidance. He reflected on how his over-reliance on Chinese teachers for motivation had prevented him from adjusting to his UK university study:

In my Chinese university, I was at top of my class so I was favoured by the teachers. When I scored lower and my rank dropped, my personal tutor would come to discuss with me and help me find out what was wrong... I felt that teachers paid attention to me, so I worked harder... It gave me a lot of inertia because I was so used to the teacher’s care. When I came here and had problems, I was still hoping that teachers would take the initiative to find me and provide care (ZI.6).

Adapting to the UK university life can be stressful for Chinese students, who come from an educational system where there is a close relationship between the teacher and students (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Despite the larger size of classes in China, there remain many opportunities for interaction between teachers and students, mainly because teachers make themselves available to students’ inquiries after class (Biggs, 1998). It is could be argued that this close teacher-student relationship may interfere in students’ autonomous learning, as Zihao’s case suggests. More evidence is needed in the future to confirm this.
In TB2, Zihao succeeded in dismissing his old belief, and started to embrace autonomous learning, which became possible because of the alignment between the teaching and teacher feedback:

*Here the teachers do not give you a direct answer, like teachers do in China. But they give you a direction and leave the answer for you to find out on your own. They will introduce lots of knowledge, expect you to expand on it, and leave you to eventually find the answer. They will recommend which books or materials to read... If you do not visit them, they will not come to you... I think it's meant to foster autonomous learning, so it is better."* (ZI.4; ZI.6).

It took Zihao a full year to complete the transition from surface learning to deep learning approaches. This provide further evidence for the argument that students’ choice of certain approaches to learning is affected by their past teaching and learning experience, and that it can take a year of tutorials for new students to understand how to cope with their subject and adjust to the process of learning and understanding (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999). Moreover, with his increasing appreciation of a learning goal, he changed his views on the relationship between ability and effort:

*When I was in China, I always attributed failure to lack of effort, as the teaching materials were easy, and there were the objective choices and ready answers in the exams. But here it is different... In Law exams, there are essay questions where you have to show the process of analysis. It’s not enough just to make an effort to remember. You need to understand and have know-how to apply it. That’s ability. You gain it mainly through more reading. If you just read and memorise a couple of times, you still do not understand. But if you read 5 or 6 times, you will understand why, and you can think more* (ZI.6).

Zihao’s emphasis on improving his ability through effort suggests that he held an apparent growth mindset. However, there were significant changes in his views on effort. Whereas in the past he had directed his effort towards mechanical memorisation to demonstrate his ability through high marks (a performance goal), now he invested his effort into the process of understanding (a learning goal) to improve himself, which meet the requirement for deep learning. The significant changes in his overall conceptions of learning may well continue to benefit him in his future studies.

5.6 Summary and discussion

Zihao’s academic self-efficacy fluctuated over his two-year study in the UK. However, demonstrating a strong inclination towards a growth mindset, he eventually overcame his challenges by learning to utilize the opportunities presented to him and made a successful transition from a surface learner to a deep learner. I will now summarise the main themes covered in this narrative analysis, based on which I seek answers to the research questions.
5.6.1 Summary

Zihao’s study at Level 5 showed relatively strong academic self-efficacy in coping with his learning. This was partly due to the fact that the majority of his first-year units were language-focused (5.3) and that there was academic support to international students in his subject area was strong (5.3.2). Furthermore, discussions with his Chinese compatriots seemed to be sufficient so that integration with home students did not appear significant to him (5.3.3).

However, the problems with his conceptions of learning were also clear: His over-reliance on teachers and his preference for a surface approach to learning under the influence of Chinese education (5.3.4) indicated potential difficulties, which peaked at Level 6 (5.4). The poor learning outcome as a result of this mismatch between his and the teachers’ approaches led to his weakened global self-efficacy, resulting in his self-protection in class and fear of failure in his social goal (5.4.2; 5.4.3; 5.4.5).

Schunk (1994, p.87) holds that ‘‘a lower sense of self-efficacy can enhance effort, self-regulation, and achievement’’ if students ‘‘feel that they are capable of learning’’. Indeed, with a strong mindset, the very doubt about his learning strategies led Zihao to make continuous effort to address his problems through various coping strategies until he reduced the discrepancy (5.5). Consequently, in TB2 at Level 6 witnessed Zihao’s transformation: He regained his self-efficacy, adopted a deep learning approach and learned to integrate with home students (5.5). Clearly, a combination of the key elements in his learning, including his individual, his cultural and the UK HE factors contributed to his transitional changes, which are summarized in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Zihao’s two-year development from Level 5 to Level 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
<th>TB1, Level 6</th>
<th>TB2, Level 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic difficulties</td>
<td>Little difficulty in language-related units; difficulty in law lectures; Unfamiliarity with examinations in the UK</td>
<td>Law-related units lectures; law essay writing skills; law examinations; integrating with home students</td>
<td>Law lectures; law essay writing;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>Growth mindset</td>
<td>Growth mindset</td>
<td>Growth mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>A performance goal</td>
<td>A performance goal</td>
<td>A learning goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping styles</td>
<td>Problem-focused</td>
<td>Problem-avoidance</td>
<td>Problem-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
<td>Seeking help from Chinese compatriots; effort in rote-learning</td>
<td>Rumination and procrastination; but also reflections</td>
<td>Effort, self-reflection, self-regulation, seeking help from teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.6.2 Discussion

Q1: What academic difficulties did he experience and how did he cope with them?

The academic difficulties Zihao experienced were consistently related to the Law units of his course, as can be seen from three perspectives: language and essay writing, integration with home students, and the approaches to learning.

His insufficient knowledge in specialist vocabulary prevented him from understanding the lectures and reading efficiently after class. While he was fully aware of such limitations, his lack of understanding of the course requirements led to his continual adoption of surface learning strategies by choosing either to answer easy questions or to avoid answering any in the seminars for self-protection ((ZI.3; ZI.5;), and by avoiding interacting with home students when encountering communication problems (ZI.2). He struggled to adapt to his Law course which required deep and autonomous learning. Having been used to an over-dependence on the teacher’s attention and support for his learning in China (ZI.5), he did not realise the significance of autonomous learning, leading to several setbacks and loss of self-efficacy. These maladaptive coping strategies (Carver & Scheier, 1990) left his problems unresolved until TB2, Level 6. The underlying problem was his conception of learning. Saljo summarises five concepts about learning (1979, p.19, quoted in Richardson, 2005, p.675):

1. Learning as the increase of knowledge.
2. Learning as memorising.
3. Learning as the acquisition of facts or procedures.
4. Learning as the abstraction of meaning.
5. Learning as an interpretative process aimed at the understanding of reality.
The first three levels indicate surface learning and the last two levels indicate deep learning. Influenced by his previous education where learning was about transmission and reproduction of theories and basic knowledge (Dello-Iacovo, 2009), Zihao appeared to be confused at the requirements by his Law course, which focused on deep and autonomous learning. The confusion led to his emotion-focused coping in TB1. What motivated him to turn to problem-focused coping in TB2 seems to be a combination of his growth mindset and his social goals. Knowing that he had obligations for his parents to succeed academically (ZI.5), which he believed he could achieve through effort, he overcame his emotional disturbances and started to look for better strategies. Through discussions with teachers, observing good practices and self-reflection, he understood that learning was about understanding and critical thinking. He was able to adjust his personal goals by lowering his expectations, and adopted deep learning strategies in TB2.

Q2. What changes did he make and why?

Zihao’s transformative changes were threefold: conceptions of learning, academic coping behaviour, and the learning outcomes. The supportive teaching and learning environment, his personal factors, in particular, his apparent growth mindset and his cultural beliefs (i.e., social goals) were all key to his transformation.

Zihao’s Law course facilitated his changes in his conception of learning. The teachers supported him in the process of developing critical thinking and analytical skills via teaching, feedback and tutorials. The assessment awarded him with higher marks for his deep learning. Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that effective learning takes place only when both teaching methods and assessment are aligned with the teaching outcomes, which should reflect how students understand by asking them not only to ‘explain’, but also ‘apply’, ‘reflect’, ‘evaluate’ and ‘apply’ what they have learned. As Zihao’s Law course reflected these elements, he benefited from and was empowered by the learning process because of his growth mindset. Building on the supportive environment, he changed from surface to deep learning, which allowed for increase in academic self-efficacy, problem-focused coping strategy use, and appreciation of the learning process.

Although he had displayed a consistent inclination towards a growth mindset, Zihao initially appeared to have devoted his effort towards mechanical memorisation, which typifies surface rather than deep learning. A deep learning goal did not take place until TB2 at Level 6 when he realised the necessity of holding such a goal to reduce the discrepancies between his goal and the UK educational requirement for deep learning. Such a finding seems to contradict Dweck’s (2000) proposal that a growth mindset is associated with a learning goal and a fixed mindset with a performance goal. Zihao’s behaviour may suggest that a growth mindset cannot be automatically translated into a learning goal as it can take time for students to develop their understanding the implications for deep learning. At least, this appears to
be true with students whose previous education has socialized them with a learning route via surface learning.

Q3. How did Chinese culture influence his academic coping?

Zihao’s learning journey indicates that Chinese cultural values in education and beliefs in effort certainly influenced his academic coping in the UK, which in turn helped facilitate the changes in his conceptions of learning, and his other behavioural changes. Zihao held strong effort attribution beliefs, but under the influence of his previous Chinese education, Zihao directed his effort towards surface learning, which resulted in his low performance and weakened self-efficacy. Despite his negative-emotion coping for lack of strategies to succeed at times, Zihao persevered, motivated by his social goals and his growth mindset.

Social goals held by students from collectivistic culture can exert significant pressure on them (Ho, Hau, & Salili, 2008), which can further lead to performance-avoidance goals and surface approaches to learning because of fear of failure to realise their goals (Chang & Wong, 2008; Liem et al., 2008). However, social goals can also be a motivating force for these students to exert themselves to succeed (Salili & Lai, 2003). The latter case applies to Zihao. The financial sacrifices his parents made for him to study abroad was a reminder for him to find solutions when problems arose (ZI.6).

Zihao’s transformation suggests that Chinese students are likely to overcome their language and academic challenges in their cross-cultural education if they have a strong growth mindset and an internalised social goal to succeed academically. By learning to adopt adaptive coping strategies such as using self-regulation, professional help and peer support, these students achieve not only better grades but also cultural integration and satisfaction.
Chapter 6 Ting’s optimism

6.1 Introduction

I became acquainted with Ting in January 2013, when I was observing her GL5 class. Different from Zihao who caught my immediate attention during class observations, I hardly even noticed Ting in her GL5 class as she was always sitting quietly in the middle row among her predominantly Chinese classmates. Apart from one lecture, Ting was present in other classes that I observed, but never volunteered to ask or answer questions except when singled out by the teacher. However, Ting presented a surprisingly different picture during the interviews. Her strong belief in overcoming all academic challenges through effort making and strategy use beckoned me to explore her seemingly uneventful learning journey. The data I gathered include interviews, class observations, online messages, informal chats, teacher feedback, her academic transcript, and also a chance talk with her parents.

Despite her academic challenges and the accompanying social pressure during her course of study, Ting reported coping well (TI.2; TI.3). Pajares (1992) argues that our belief system consists of both central and peripheral beliefs. Whereas the central beliefs, including such beliefs as are related to our identity, are consistent, the peripheral beliefs, including those we learned from others, are context-dependent. Ting’s central belief in overcoming challenges with effort and optimism seems to have guided her towards problem-focused coping in her learning. Still, avoidance-coping, which suggests a lack of academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993), is also evident at different stages. Her story provides insight into how self-efficacy and strategy use can fluctuate in an international student despite the presence of an overall inclination towards a growth mindset.

I now first use first-person narrative to provide Ting’s background information as her values and beliefs formed via socialisation impacted her later UK study. I then explore the details of her academic coping over the two-year undergraduate study (2012-2014), using narrative analysis (Riessman, 2003) and thick description (Geertz, 1973). In the end, I evaluate her learning experiences by answering the research questions, which include:

Q1. What academic difficulties did she experience and how did she cope with them?

Q2. What changes did she make and why?

Q3. How did Chinese culture influence her academic coping and learning?

6.2 Ting’s background

I was born a happy girl. Perhaps I have inherited this from my parents. Both of them are happy people. My father used to be a doctor, but now he is running his own business. He studies Chinese philosophy, including Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, but he does not accept everything. He always tells me
that there are two sides of a coin, so we need to be flexible and look for what is workable and learn from it. My mother is a scientist. She does not talk much but is always finding fun in her own way (TI.3; TI.5). I always enjoy chatting with my parents. We are like friends. I feel so lucky to be born into such a family. I feel a harmonious relationship is very important (TI.3).

I did not want to study at school. I was traumatized by the teacher in charge of my class at primary school. She would single out weak students like me who made mistakes, labelling and physically punishing them, so I have always felt both respect and fear towards teachers. By the time I reached high school, I had not formed the study habit and my knowledge foundation was too weak to catch up. Then there was the teacher that I disliked. It was popular for students to send gifts to teachers. My mother would often send gifts to the teacher in charge of my class, so he paid special attention to me. I felt repelled by this, thinking “you are treating me well just because of my mother’s gifts”. So I continued to neglect my study. I particularly hated English because I disliked rote learning (TI.6; TN.15). Gradually, I wrote myself off as hopeless and acted recklessly. I didn’t care what the teachers said about me (TI.2). My mother simply gave up hope of sending me to university (TI.6).

In 2010 I took gaokao. I got only about 200 points in total (out of 750), and 29 points (out of 150) in English (TI.1; TI.2). My father said to me that since I didn’t have the ability to go to university in China, he would pay for me to study English abroad. My father said that if I could study English—the language I most dislike—with success, then nothing would be difficult for me in the future. I thought about it and believed what he said was right. I had no choice but to accept this advice (TI.2).

I went to a Chinese college which cooperated with this UK University to study Business Management. I do not think I learned much. The course covered some basic knowledge in business management, accounting and maths, all conducted in Chinese. But my focus was to study English and pass IELTS to go abroad.

English was a core unit, covering listening, speaking, reading and writing based on the requirements of IELTS. Teaching was still teacher-centred, with few interactions in class. They taught memorisation skills to deal with IELTS. I hated rote learning and I did not know how to apply those skills (TI.6), so it was very difficult for me to pass IELTS (TI.2).

If I could not come to a UK university to get a degree, I would be only seen as a high school graduate and I cannot hope to find a good job in the market now. So I just tried my best to learn it well. When others went out playing and were sleeping, I would read. I never had any interest in English, so I just forced myself to memorise everything (TI.2; TI.6). I repeated IELTS five times in three years. Every time I repeated, I felt really bad. But “quantitative change leads to qualitative change”. You have to accumulate a lot. Then all of a sudden, you will find that you are capable of something. I obtained 4.5 in IELTS at the last attempt in 2012. I was so happy that I could at last obtain a visa (TI.2)!
Before I came to the UK, I knew language could be a big challenge for me, but I had to come; otherwise, there would be no future. English is my second language. I cannot expect to learn my course as easily as I do with my mother tongue. So there are bound to be some difficulties. I just have to deal with them (TI.5).

As the lowest entry requirement for my course was an IELTS score of 5.5, I came to the UK to attend an 8-week pre-sessional course at the University in July 2012 (TI.1). When I came here, I knew nothing. But my teacher Al was very responsible. Instead of asking us to do what he called ‘perfunctory activities’ like presentations, he would ask us to sit in groups to discuss or debate, and we learned to improve our spoken English (TI.6).

He was also strict with us. For example, we were doing a survey project. He asked us to take one picture for each interview we conducted with the participant to make sure that we did not make up the data, as we had heard students from other classes did. He would match the photos with the interview one by one. I learned how to do surveys and interviews through this. Later, he guided us to write a step-by-step report. 1250 words was such a daunting task for me at that time, but under his guidance, I learned how to do a literature review, conduct a survey, and write a report (TI.6). Also, he would have a quiz for pair work. He set some questions about British culture or literature for us to check online in pairs and to compete with each other. He engaged us in a word game to check our vocabulary. I learned more language from the Pre-sessional course than from others (TI.6).

Ting’s past learning experience seems to have conditioned her with the tendency to hold both a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. Her pre-university experience indicates Ting’s failure in gaokao marked a transition for Ting as a student. Her school educational environment seemed to have been detrimental to her belief systems. The primary school teacher’s criticism of her ability, her mother’s bribing the teacher in exchange for some performance-focussed favour may have helped her develop a predominantly fixed mindset. Reeve (2014) contends that a fixed mindset can lead to low self-efficacy, which is accompanied by negative emotions and decreased effort. Ting’s earlier learning environment that accentuated rote learning and ability may have influenced her learning orientation, which would also affect her later UK study.

If obtaining an IELTS good enough to obtain a student visa to the UK helped her establish a firm belief in a growth mindset, her father’s encouragement further confirmed this belief. More importantly, the focus on ‘experiential learning’, which emphasizes the concrete experiences of the problem-finding and problem-solving process (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) as typified by Ting’s PSE teacher seems to have matched her developing growth mindset and expectations for a different style of learning, which was essential for her later motivation to learn.
Ting’s father seemed to be instrumental in shaping her way of coping, which is why I now provide a brief summary of my encounter with her parents. In July 2014, I had a chance meeting with Ting and her parents when they came to the UK to visit Ting. Perhaps because my research involved their daughter, her parents had a long chat with me. Both appearing to be cultured and modest, they were positive about the UK environment, saying that “it was definitely worthwhile to have sent Ting to study abroad” and they were happy to realise Ting had become “more mature and independent” since coming to the UK (TN.11). Ting’s father’s influence on her coping behaviour, which she mentioned during the interviews (TI.1; TI.2; TI.3; TI.4) was evident from our conversation, as evidenced by the following notes that I took immediately afterwards.

I did not force Ting to study when she was a child as I always believe that children should enjoy their childhood in a stress-free environment. We do not push her to study, but we tell her that whatever she does, she needs to think about the consequences. As long as she passes the course through her own effort, it is fine with us. As a girl, she does not have to aspire too high. Study is important, but there are other aspects that she needs to pay attention to, for example, learning to be kind and helpful, staying with better people and learning from them.

We are glad to see she has been enjoying her life here. We think she should take the opportunity to learn something about the real world. So, when she discussed with us about working in a restaurant, we both supported her. My business is firmly established and thriving, so we do not need the money from her part-time work. The main purpose is for her to walk out of the ‘ivory tower’ and learn to observe people. This will be very useful for her future career.

After Ting graduates, we plan for her to learn to do business in my friends’ companies to gain some work experience before she sets up her own business. I have always warned her that she may use up our money eventually, so she has to be equipped with the ability to be independent (TN.11).

As a cultured middle-class Chinese parent, Ting’s father seemed to focus on some traditional Chinese cultural values such as becoming independent through her own effort, learning to be a good person and also trying to learn something practical. Interestingly, while he encouraged his daughter to become independent through her own effort, he also advised her not to over-exert herself. Accordingly, he seems to hold both beliefs of a growth mindset (achieving success via effort) and those of a fixed mindset (reservations about female roles in society). However, the embracing of seemingly contradictory beliefs can be better explained by the influence of Taoism, a Chinese philosophy advocating the reconciliation between two extremes to reach a balanced life style (Chang, 2011). Thus, according to this line of thinking, these cultural expectations for girls are considered acceptable: That they do need some degree of independence; however, they do not need to excel. Ting seems to have been much influenced by this philosophical belief held by her father, which will be evident as the story unfolds.
Ting was formally admitted by the University and enrolled in International Trade and Business Communication (ITBC) in September 2012, starting her two-year undergraduate study, Level 5 (09/2012-06/2013) and Level 6 (09/2013-06/2014). Table 6.1 shows the contents of Ting’s course.

Table 6.1: Ting’s two-year course content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Academic Session (2012-2013)</th>
<th>Academic Session (2013-2014)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core</td>
<td>• General Language Grade 5 (GL5)</td>
<td>• Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Business Communication 2 (BC2)</td>
<td>• General Language Grade 6 (GL6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Corporate Analysis and Strategies in an International Context</td>
<td>• Business Communication 3 (BC3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Marketing and Communication</td>
<td>• International Marketing and Export Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• International trade- Payment and Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option</td>
<td>• Professional Communication for Business</td>
<td>• Translation Theory and Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Business and Markets in a Global Environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the following, I will describe her two-year learning journey chronologically, separating Level 5 and Level 6 in order to identify the contrasts. The narrative analysis will enable us to explore the three research questions:

Q1. What academic difficulties did she experience and what were her coping strategies?

Q2. What changes did she experience and why?

Q3. How did Chinese culture influence her academic coping?

6.3 Level 5 learning experience

My detailed study of Ting started from TB2 of Level 5, which was her first year. The data that I gathered for Level 5 includes two interviews, six class observations, some informal talks and online chatting. Conscious of the possible bias caused by too much reliance on the participant’s own story (4.8), I also triangulated Ting’s self-report with some teacher feedback and her academic transcripts.

During the interviews as well as on other occasions, Ting left me with the impression that her study at Level 5 was uneventful and that she was very satisfied with her own academic achievement. However, an analysis of her Level5 academic transcript suggests otherwise. The incompatibility between Ting’s
perceived success and her actual performance may provide some interesting insights into her beliefs and coping behaviour in an environment which presented both challenges and risks. In the following, I will first describe one of Ting’s GL5 classes through ‘thick description’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in order to provide the general learning context to which Ting was exposed.

6.3.1 A snapshot of Ting’s GL5 class (30/01/2013)

Ting’s GL5 class takes place in a big seminar room with a traditional layout. 14 students are sitting in four rows, with two aisles in between. Ting is again sitting in the second row next to Min (also my participant, whose spoken English appeared to be much better than Ting’s, as shown in the interview). I sit in the corner in the last row in order to minimize the intrusion caused by my presence.

At 10am the class begins. As usual, the teacher starts the lesson by presenting through the visualizer the common errors students made in their last writing assignment. Today she is showing the students the correct order of adjectives in English by raising examples such as “an old baggy brown cotton jumper”, “stunning wide green eyes” and “a vintage brown leather bag”. All students are concentrating and taking notes.

Now the teacher returns students’ work asking them to correct the errors for her to check later. I glance at the writing of a male student sitting next to me. The mistakes have been highlighted in different colours. One female student in the front row asks the teacher: “Why have I got a zero?” “It is copied from the Internet so it is not your work,” the teacher replies. Another girl asks the teacher how to use the word ‘elegance’ in writing. To answer her, the teacher shows the whole class online how to use collocations through Sketch Engine (a linguistic corpus).

At 10:30, the teacher introduces the new lesson, description of a place. First, she asks students to skim the text for the key words that help to identify the city being described. Very soon students give the answer—it is the city where they are studying. The teacher then asks them to describe orally both the negative and the positive aspects of the city. Immediately many volunteers speak up—the subject seems to interest them. Seeing students’ hesitation over some vocabulary, for example, ‘gleam’ and ‘cobblestone’, the teacher quickly googles pictures to illustrate them on the screen. Students watch and take notes.

Next, students read two different descriptions of the city and talk about their preferences in groups. Then they are asked to find the metaphorical expressions in pairs. Meanwhile, the teacher walks around to check their understanding and explain vocabulary to them.

After completing the text in the handbook, the teacher distributes additional speaking activities, asking them to talk about their impressions of Great Britain. As volunteers describe the pub, the food, the
weather and the buildings, the teacher encourages them to take long turns by asking “What about them?” when they use only phrases.

So far, the majority of the class appear to be happily engaged in this dynamic turn-taking to talk about a familiar subject. However, although I cannot see their expressions as I am sitting two rows behind them, neither Ting nor Min has volunteered to speak up even once.

At 11:25am, as a prelude to the writing task, the teacher and students construct the first paragraph together entitled ‘A description of Great Britain’, which she types and displays on the screen.

At 11:30 am, students focus on their own descriptive writing about a place while the teacher checks students’ improvement of their last week’s writing and answers their questions. Just before 12am, she collects their work, promising to give it back the next week (TO.3).

The other GL5 classes that I observed looked similar. The teaching was clearly student-centred and a communicative language teaching approach was used; ample opportunities were created for students to improve their overall language skills by using the language in meaningful contexts (Richards, 2006). Student participation seemed to be high, which formed a clear contrast to Ting’s reticence (TO.1-TO.6). Although she appeared to be focused and joined in pair and group discussions, I never saw Ting interacting with the teacher.

Ting’s reticence in class intrigued me. I had initially thought it was due to her low self-efficacy in her language (TN.1), which has often been identified as a factor for student reticence in class (Liu & Jackson, 2008). However, this assumption contradicted the impression that I obtained from her interview, where she reported a fairly high level of self-efficacy in her language improvement.

Ting said that she could understand GL5 classes (TI.6). However, the depth of understanding seemed questionable, given her low marks in almost all units at this period (T.T). Nevertheless, Ting attributed her reticence to her acclaimed prejudice from the GL5 teacher. Two incidents seemed to have led to this impression. One was related to her receiving a warning from the school administrator for low attendance:

But we were late due to the delay of our presentation in the previous class. As she had set up a rule that any students who came 15 minutes late should not come at all, we did not dare to go to class. Instead, we emailed her explaining the situation. But she still reported us to the Administration, and we each got a warning letter! I felt she was uncaring (TI.6).

According to the university attendance policy, students receive an email warning after three absences from a monitored unit such as GL5. Although teachers do the register, it is the school administration staff who issue students a warning letter, and mistakes can happen due to their miscalculation. Not knowing this, Ting reacted negatively towards the teacher. She was likely to have taken this official
warning as a public disgrace, particularly when her father had asked her not to “lose Chinese people’s face” when studying abroad:

*My father often told me … that I must no longer think of myself as an individual once I am in the UK. I cannot afford to lose face. I cannot lose the Chinese people’s face. It’s a patriotic knot. Whatever I do, I must first of all, live up to my parents’ expectations, then to myself, and to my country”* (TI.2).

The concept of ‘face’ in Confucian society has been equated with an individual’s contingent self-esteem, and having or losing face is closely related to their academic success by Chinese university students (Hwang, 2006). Ting connected her social goal or social obligations with face or family honour, and considered her academic success to be a face-saving indicator. It seems that while her social goal brought with it high expectations and was thus motivating, the high pressure that accompanied social goals was debilitating, particularly when she faced challenge and failure. This was clearly the case with Ting when she received a low mark from the same teacher:

*She gave me a very low score for an assignment at just over 40 % for the portfolio in TB1. I had written the draft for her to make comments on and improved the draft, still she gave me a very low mark. I began to dislike her* (TN.15).

Ting’s negative response might also be explained by her disappointment at her futile effort. So far she had been displaying a growth mindset and a mastery orientation in her learning, and she had learned from her own experience that effort should pay off. However, the repeated failure in GL5 not only contradicted her belief but also made her feel that she was losing face (and also her family honour). Therefore, she appears to have engaged in self-protection, behaviour not consistent with a growth mindset, blaming the GL5 teacher for the low mark. As the teacher happened to be a source of threat to her self-esteem the second time, she then avoided interactions with the teacher in order not to further expose her vulnerability. However, by doing so, she was also rejecting the professional language help from the teacher, which could have benefitted her language improvement. This clearly demonstrates the fluidity of students’ learning orientations, even the mindset beliefs themselves.

### 6.3.2 Overcoming language challenges

Ting’s negative attitude towards her GL5 lessons, however, did not seem to have affected her motivation to improve her language learning in general. On the contrary, her holding a growth mindset allowed her to improve her language through both effort and positive thinking.

The literature suggests that although IELTS scores cannot predict future academic success (Dooey & Oliver, 2002), they do appear to affect students’ performances in the early stages of university life (Yen & Kuzma, 2009). Ting still encountered language-related problems due to her low language level despite some improvement during the PSE course. The fact that she received low GL5 scores also
evidenced this. What was surprising was her apparent optimistic beliefs in overcoming these difficulties. What she perceived as “only small difficulties” (TI.1) appeared to be significant challenges and sources of worries for my other participants. As a PhD student myself, I was experiencing much pressure, feeling uncertain about where the research was taking me at the time. Ting’s buoyancy left me determined to explore her learning journey to discover what strategies she adopted and how she could manage to cope while maintaining her positive thinking.

Although she had passed the PSE course, her language still appeared to be weak, which means that she was yet to overcome many language hurdles at the beginning of her university study. She recalled how she had to rely on others to interpret for her at the beginning:

*When I first came here, I could understand about 50% in all classes. I had to sit near Chinese students whose levels were higher and asked them occasionally: What did the teacher say? I felt I created troubles for them, so gradually I tried my best to understand the teachers by myself (TI.1).*

Realising that she should be independent in order to prove that she “had the ability to study in a UK University” (TN.7), she started to tackle her listening problem by observing and learning from her peers:

*I saw a Chinese girl who had come one year earlier than me print out materials. She told me that this could help her understand the teacher. So, I bought a printer. After class, I would print out all the teaching courseware and then try to read it, consulting the dictionary when I came across new words (TI.1).*

Ting’s flexibility in solving her language problems through her own effort and seeking out strategies and trying them suggest a growth mindset. As argued in the literature (Dweck, 2008), people with a growth mindset tend to have learning goals, invest more effort and persevere in the event of difficulties. Ting appeared to be determined to overcome her academic obstacles by changing herself and becoming more self-regulated. By keeping a tight schedule to ensure she could routinely preview and review all units (TI.1), Ting reported improvement in language in TB2 at Level5:

*It’s getting better every day as I listen every day, although the improvement is not as fast as when I first came. Definitely it will improve little by little because at some stage you may stop before you improve further. You just have to work continuously and patiently before you move to the next stage (TI.2).*

A growth mindset, which is accompanied by positivity in face of difficulties is evident in Ting’s remarks. Fredrickson (2013) argues that there is an “upward spiral dynamic between positive emotions and personal and social resources” (p.26). Positive emotions contribute to the development of resources and the availability of resources will predict more positive emotions, which will further increase one’s mindfulness towards positive coping. Indeed, just because she believed in her language improvement
through long-time effort, Ting was able to cope with the difficulties with positive emotions and problem-focused coping strategies. Likewise, she applied the same positivity to her essays.

6.3.3 Dealing with the essays

As happens with many international students (3.2.2), Ting reported experiencing difficulties writing in English for lack of experience (TI.1). Nevertheless, her growth mindset likely helped her to nurture positive thinking when difficulties arose. This enabled her to tackle essay problems with strong self-regulation, as indicated by use of metacognitive strategies such as monitoring her own progress and making adjustment, investing in effort and organising her time. These metacognitive strategies, together with writing strategies such as subject-specific patch-writing and proofreading, helped her to retain high academic self-efficacy, despite the fluidity of self-efficacy beliefs (Wyatt, 2010). The consistency in her self-efficacy in turn enabled learning goals in the learning process, as is illustrated next.

6.3.3.1 Displaying strong self-regulation

In order to “produce good quality work” (TI.1), Ting reported making changes by overcoming her habitual procrastination and started to prepare her essays at least two weeks in advance, to allow sufficient time to carry out her writing plan. Furthermore, she would choose to stay in the library to study because of the quiet environment:

*I do not want to turn in a lousy essay and I always exert myself. Perhaps my ability is limited. Others may get similar marks even if they do not deal with an essay seriously. But I do not want to feel guilty. I do not want to disappoint myself. After all, you earn your credits in the UK. Marks are everything to me* (TI.2).

Her strategic management of the essay writing process in combination with time management appears to have been another source of her self-efficacy in writing:

*I always divide the whole essay into several parts. I then decide how many words I can write in each part. For important parts, I write more words. Each paragraph is only about 100-200 words. Each day I write only a couple of paragraphs, about a few hundred words* (TI.1; TI.2).

Furthermore, motivated by a learning goal, she reported not only considering “all the possible questions” before writing but also seeking help from peers and teachers when encountering difficulties:

*If I come across questions, I will first ask friends. If they cannot answer them, I then turn to the teachers. I do not hesitate to ask the teachers when I have problems... What if the teacher is not pleased with my writing and does not give me high marks? After asking the teacher, I am clear about what to write about. They are goo and always answer questions* (TI.1; TI.2).
Ting’s juggling between a learning goal and a performance goal is clear here. Completing an essay through her own effort as well as consulting with others are clear indications of a learning goal, although her concern about high marks may also point to worries about her performance. Research indicates that the combination of a learning goal with a performance goal produces better academic results than a single goal pursuit (Linnenbrink, 2005). Indeed, the combination of a learning and a performance goal enabled Ting to feel both self-efficacious and satisfied with her essay writing by the end of Level 5, saying that she had “never got stuck” for lack of ideas (TI.2).

6.3.3.2 Making use of patch-writing

Patch-writing is defined as a practice of “reproducing source language with some words deleted or added, some grammatical structures altered, or some synonyms used” (Howard, Serviss, & Rodrigue, 2010, p.181). Ting’s use of the ‘patch-writing’ strategy is evident from the following remarks:

First I think out some ideas and structures. Then I will try to find online anonymous papers, then group the materials based on the themes. If I agree with their ideas, then I write accordingly, as I think they can represent mine. I then change the sentence structures here and there, and add some words of my own. Then there will be enough words and the essay is done! Then I will improve the grammar, make the sentence structure a bit more complicated, the words more formal (TI.1; TI.2).

Ting used patching writing as a survival strategy to cope with her low language competence and difficulty in structuring English essays at this stage. She would reject this strategy as her understanding of essay writing matured at Level 6. Ting’s situation appears to mirror that of many Chinese students. Li and Casanave (2012), for example, report in their qualitative studies that the main reason for their Chinese students to patch other people’s work together is their lack of experience in writing academic English. Other similar studies (e.g., Hayes & Introna, 2005) argue that patch-writing is a strategy adopted by students whose language level is insufficient to express themselves and who have to borrow other people’s words. They suggest that as a starting point in a student’s development in learning, patching writing should be treated as ‘unintentional plagiarism’ in contrast to ‘deliberate plagiarism’, and therefore should be tolerated at the initial stage.

6.3.3.3 Making use of proof-reading

Despite her declared self-efficacy in essay writing, Ting’s adopting of a patch-writing strategy suggests that following the English writing conventions was not always easy. Indeed, she nearly failed a unit for careless referencing. Ting recounted that the teacher crossed out the original 41%, and gave her 34% instead for her poor referencing in the first assignment, which accounted for 50% of the unit assessment. The 7% difference was sufficient for her to fail. She reported that she was “very confused about how to use correct in-text citation and references as required” by the teacher who “paid special attention to referencing”. Worried that she might fail, she paid a Chinese student doing an MA at the same
University to “proofread the references and grammar” of her second essay. She obtained 55% this time, allowing her to obtain a bare pass mark of 44% (TN.7).

The improved mark through proof-reading further raised Ting’s awareness of the importance of references. Thereafter, she “learned to write down all references very carefully” in all subsequent essays (TN.7), a process she found both “time-consuming and agonising”, but she said she would “never do a perfunctory job because of good marks and living up to my own expectations” (TI.2).

Ting’s reactions towards negative feedback suggest that she was holding a growth mindset and pursuing a learning goal. Her self-reflections on her problems and making an effort to address them indicate that she was using a metacognitive strategy in learning; her high expectations of herself indicate her strong self-efficacy in improving her learning.

6.3.3.4 Using positive restructuring

A prominent coping strategy for Ting was positive restructuring. Positive restructuring involves individuals learning a lesson or deriving positive meaning out of negative experiences (Thoits, 1995). This concept appears synonymous with Folkman’s ‘meaning-focused coping’ (Folkman, 2008) as both coping strategies focus on reinterpreting a stressful situation in a more positive light. Positive restructuring contributed to a sustained motivation in Ting’s learning.

Ting claimed that “there is no enjoyment” but “only a sense of achievement” after she had completed an essay through hard work (TI.2). It is interesting to note that she was able to stay focused on her studies despite distractions and achieved satisfaction despite reporting little interest in her subjects at this stage. Her concentration suggests that she was task-focused, which resembles some aspects of ‘flow’, but which was not as transformative. According to the flow theory, ‘flow’ is a state of deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically enjoyable. Concentration, interest and enjoyment are conditions for flow to take place. In order to concentrate, students need to be competent in their skills to meet the challenges so that their skills “are neither overmatched nor underutilized to meet a given challenge” (Shernoff et al., 2003, p.160). When feeling competent, students experience positive emotional responses such as good mood, enjoyment, esteem, and intrinsic motivation, which further lead to active engagement in class (Shernoff et al., 2003). Clearly, Ting achieved concentration in her learning, but was lacking in interest and enjoyment.

Ting’s positivity was evident in her dealing with two incidents. One involved her father’s mistaken transaction of her whole year’s living expenses to another person’s account. Forced to visit the bank several times after class, she said she also benefitted from practising her “broken English” in the process (TI.3). The other involved the sudden departure of her housemate, which left her facing subsequent disputes with the landlord and the necessity of finding another lodging immediately just before Christmas when several assignments were due. However, Ting thought it was a blessing in disguise as
she was able to relocate herself to share a flat with two Chinese post-graduate students, from whom she obtained much academic support (TI.3).

Because of her dedication to her studies, such incidents did not seem to have affected her learning; on the contrary, she reported being able to think positively and deriving meaning out of a stressful situation, which helped her to remain focused on her learning tasks. Her positive thinking can be further attributed to an internalised social goal and her father’s influence on her life. Just as an internalised social goal has been found to be associated with positive coping such as investment in effort and persistence in learning by students from Eastern cultures (Fulligni, 2001), Ting reported always trying to see “both sides of the coin” and believed “there is a way out whatever happens” (TI.3):

Nothing matters more than study….I just feel that I must try my best to get as high scores as possible....I am learning now just for the sake of getting higher scores and entering at least the Business School at the University for a Master’s degree, if I cannot go to a better university (TL2).

The belief in effecting a change through her own effort and acting accordingly allowed Ting to make progress. Although her Level 5 academic transcript indicates that she obtained marks within a range of low 40% and low 50% (T.T), she felt satisfied at the achievement made through her own effort (TI.3). Precisely because she believed in herself but also accepted small changes, she was able to face her academic difficulties with consistent effort and perseverance, which also helped her to experience an overall sense of satisfaction about her progress at Level 5 (TI.1; TI.2; TI.3). More importantly, as a result of her growth mindset, which was accompanied by effort and positive thinking, Ting was able to maintain her academic self-efficacy at Level 5:

I hadn’t studied hard and only played around at school, so my knowledge base was weaker than others. But I think I have the ability. Compared with people of my age, I think more and do things more thoroughly. I am psychologically stronger. There are more perspectives in my way of thinking. So I am trying to use my own strength to offset my own weakness (TI.2).

As students with a growth mindset believe that they can change themselves through effort (Dweck, 2008), they are more likely to have self-efficacy in adopting various strategies to solve problems (Schunk, 1991). Ting appears to be one of these students. Both a growth mindset and the internalisation of her social goals motivated Ting to persevere despite distractions. Ting’s positive thinking helped her to maintain her self-efficacy, which is vital for a learning goal pursuit. Consequently, she did not seem to suffer from the ‘learning shock’ (Gu & Maley, 2008) that international students tend to experience in their first year despite her low English competence at Level 5.

Despite an apparent growth mindset, which was accompanied by a learning goal, Ting also adopted some dysfunctional strategies due to repeated failure despite effort, and the risk of losing face. As discussed previously (6.3.1), a possible consequence of her avoiding interactions with her GL5 teacher,
for example, could have resulted in Ting’s slow language improvement, an issue she was to tackle at Level 6.

6.4 Level 6 learning experience

Ting’s growth mindset, strong self-regulation and positive thinking, which featured in her Level-5 study enabled her to be academically self-efficacious despite challenges. I was curious about whether she could continue to maintain a high level of self-efficacy and develop her mindset to its full potential, to demonstrate that she could study with interest and deep understanding, as indicated by flow theory (Shernoff et al., 2003). With these questions in mind, I started the second-year data collection, which includes six interviews, four class observations (Table 6.2), some informal talks and online chatting, as well triangulations from her essay feedback and her academic transcript.

In recounting her Level 6 story, I first summarize my class observations to illustrate Ting’s adoption of varied coping strategies at Level 6. I then explore the changes in her academic coping by constant comparisons between Level 5 and Level 6.

Table 6.2: Summary of Ting’s class observations at Level 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Class Atmosphere</th>
<th>Ting’s Behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TO.7</td>
<td>14/10/2013</td>
<td>Payment and Law lecture</td>
<td>See ‘snap shot’</td>
<td>Ting fails to turn up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9-10am</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO.8</td>
<td>16/10/2013</td>
<td>Translation Theory and Practice</td>
<td>Approx. 19 students. Teacher talks most of the time, but also calls on individual students to translate.</td>
<td>She sits there quietly, sometimes looks bored, but follows the teacher anyway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12-1 pm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO.9</td>
<td>12/11/2013</td>
<td>GL6</td>
<td>Teacher talks mostly. Very few interactions. The majority of the class are quiet and look bored.</td>
<td>She sits next to a quiet girl. Answers teacher’s question correctly. Discusses with neighbours on both sides.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11am-1pm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO.10</td>
<td>19/11/2013</td>
<td>GL6</td>
<td>Teacher talks most of the time. Students appear unhappy, some sit passively most of the time</td>
<td>Ting seems to be bored, judging from her body language. Once Answers teacher’s question correctly; discusses with a French girl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11am-13pm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As explained previously (4.6.1), following Ting’s suggestion that Payment and Law was “extremely difficult to follow”(TN.4), I observed one lecture in October, 2013. Ting, however, surprisingly did not
attend this lecture. Remembering similar criticisms about this lecture by other participants, I decided to sit through it at the back of the lecture theatre, hence the following snapshot.

6.4.1 A snapshot of a Payment and Law lecture (14/10/2013)

The lecture is conducted in an elegantly designed lecture hall. There are approximately 200 students and almost all are Chinese. The teacher is reading something related to payment in international business transactions, which he had prepared on the fairly detailed slides. He only stops a couple of times when several students sitting in the front rows ask him questions. However, his strong French accent makes it very difficult for me to follow, making me doubt my own listening ability.

In the middle rows some students are reading the PPT on their iPads; others seem to be browsing websites on their mobile phones. A girl sitting next to me is preparing for a presentation for another class. The male students in the last 6 rows have been chatting in Chinese incessantly at their normal volume, making it very hard to concentrate despite my best effort. At the same time, the teacher is talking as loudly as ever, as if to overcome the hum from the students. Occasionally he stops and the noise dies down a little, but only to continue the moment he starts again.

At 9:40 am, a male student holding a register for students to sign is approaching the last few rows. The girl next to me signs her own name as well as that of two other absent students. Five minutes later, the lesson is over. A few students in the front rows rush to the teacher for questions while the rest seem to be just as happy as I am to go away for a break (TO.7).

Now I began to understand the participants’ concerns about being unable to pass the assessment due to their incomprehension of the unit. I felt that the teacher’s strong first language accent made it difficult to follow him consistently. A transmission style of teaching, which was demonstrated by his merely reading from lecture slides with few explanations, reminded me of a practice teacher. Focusing on the delivery of the content within the time limit, he seemed to have totally neglected the effects of such a delivery on the students.

In her later message, Ting explained that she would only skip this lecture sometimes due to its early hour, but that even if she attended the lecture, she could understand only approximately 30%. She described the teacher as one who would “just keep on reading the materials from the slides” in the lecture and ask students to “take turns to read aloud an article” in his seminar, which they could not understand anyway. A lack of relatedness left many students, including Ting, simply skipping this “very boring and meaningless” unit (TN.13).

Students’ perceptions of their learning environment strongly affect their approaches to learning (Entwistle & Tait, 1990). In particular, teacher-centred teaching which aims at information transmission is likely to encourage students to adopt a surface approach to studying (Trigwell, Prosser, &
Waterhouse, 1999). Also, students’ perceptions of heavy workload from a subject or lack of interest may also discourage them from learning deeply (Kember, 2004). Both negative factors seemed to be evident in this unit, which was likely to have contributed to Ting’s feeling of helplessness towards the essay assessment, which will be discussed later.

6.4.2 A summary of Ting’s GL6 classes

I observed her GL6 classes twice. Coincidentally, Ting was sharing the same GL6 teacher with Zihao. As the class was organised in a horseshoe shape, I was able to observe Ting’s behaviour very closely in both lessons. During my first observation, I noticed that Ting was sitting at a corner with a seemingly quiet female student, and appeared to be as concentrated as she had been in her GL5 classes. What caused my attention was the fact that Ting was among the few who had completed the teacher’s assignment and provided a correct answer when the teacher asked her (TO.9).

The second observation of her GL6 class was similar. Ting provided a correct answer to the exercise when asked by the teacher. However, sitting in the same position with the same girl, Ting appeared to be bored and sometimes yawned. During a brief discussion period, she talked with the only French female student in class, who also appeared to be the only one that asked the teacher questions a couple of times. The class atmosphere was almost the same as that during my observation of Zihao’s GL6 class, with the teacher talking, some students taking notes silently and others simply sitting there passively, all looking despondent (TO.10).

Ting commented that her GL6 class was “too boring” and the teacher’s accent was “too strong”, and therefore, “it is the teacher’s rather than the students’ fault that we are so quiet in class” (TL.3). I was curious about why the teacher should have asked Ting to answer a question in both classes, taking into consideration that there were very few teacher-student interactions in this GL6 class (TO.10). Ting explained that she was continuously preparing her lessons as during Level 5, and therefore, the teacher would sometimes ask her to provide an answer (TN.4).

Ting appeared to remain as strongly self-regulated as she was at Level 5: She still invested effort and time in her GL6 unit despite the low morale of the class and her lack of appreciation of the teacher’s teaching. Her interaction with the French female student, the only non-Chinese in the class also suggests that her language skills had improved, which she also confirmed in the interviews (TI.3; TI.5).

6.4.3 Continued positive attitude towards learning

Despite her dissatisfaction with certain units, Ting reported an overall satisfaction with her course at Level 6. She obviously enjoyed her learning, saying that she particularly liked BC3, International Marketing and Export Trade, and Project because “the teachers are very nice….and patient”, and “their teaching is very interesting and efficient; there is much to learn” (TI.3).
Fredrickson’s ‘broaden and build’ theory argues that positive emotion broadens people’s perspectives and builds up their personal resources, both of which also help develop resilience in the case of stressful situations (Fredrickson, 2013). Research findings also indicate that there is a reciprocal relationship between positive emotions and students’ personal resources in that greater personal resources may lead to more commitment to study (Ouweneel, Le Blanc, & Schaufeli, 2011). Ting’s focus on the positive emotions about her learning environment continued to help her to face academic difficulties and cope with them strategically at Level 6.

However, while she focused only on her studies at Level 5, Ting decided to divert some of her attention to real-world experience at Level 6. She adopted strategic learning approaches to different units depending on the different values that she attached to them.

6.4.4 Learning from a part-time job

In early November 2013, I was surprised to learn that Ting was working part-time at a Malaysian restaurant. Given her affluent family economic background, surely, she does not need a £6 per hour part-time job? Also, how can she balance her study with this part-time work (TN.5)? I noted. Ting’s remarks during the interview revealed the answer:

My attitude has changed. Last year, I came here for the first year, so I did not know how to set priorities. But this year, I know I should deal with the most important assignments more seriously. For those less important ones, which do not count in the final score, although I do not deal with them casually, I will not spend as much time. Instead, I devote more time to what may bring me higher marks, for example, the Project (TI.3).

A performance goal was evident in her strategic time management at this stage. Focusing only on the summative assessment, it was unlikely that she benefitted from the formative assessment, which has been advocated for its positive role in helping students in deep learning (Bennett, 2011; Biggs & Tang, 2011). Furthermore, although she still valued high marks, there seemed to be less effort involved compared to Level 5, as is evidenced in our following conversation:

I: Last year, you said “Marks are everything for me”. Does this still hold true for you?

She: Not exactly. I think I did fine last year. I have obtained fairly satisfactory marks from last year; also I have decided to take my MA course in this university, so my marks have reached the requirement (2.2). Now I think I should divert my attention to other aspects like working part-time to improve my social skills and to gain some experience in business. I need that for my future business work. Otherwise, in another two years, I will go back to China with little knowledge…because what I have learned in the UK might not be all applicable to China. Some is still theoretical, and I need to put it into practice (TI.3).
Ting’s contentment over what she had achieved and her choice of moderating her effort suggested the influence of Taoism:

*I feel as a person, if you expect too much, you tire yourself out. I want to live happily, and there is no use pursuing too much…. I am different from my friends in that I always feel if I can achieve something through my own effort, then I should try my best* (TI.4).

Guided by this Taoist philosophy, Ting reported being able to enjoy her life and achieving a balance by studying in the library in the day time and working at the restaurant in the evening (TN.6). She regarded her part-time job as an opportunity to “break away from study” and to improve her language skills. She reported enjoying this kind of experiential learning and benefitting from it:

*All the customers are non-Chinese…. There are many opportunities to communicate. Some older native speakers are so happy to chat with me… So my listening and speaking are improving fast. I no longer feel nervous when chatting with foreigners* (TI.3).

Her enjoyment of improving her speaking from her part-time work forms a clear contrast to her reticence in her GL5 class. While this may be explained by a match between experiential learning and her preferred learning style, it was also likely that there was less threat to her self-esteem in an informal learning context like a restaurant, where there was no teacher as a potential evaluator and hence, less fear about being judged.

6.4.5 Dealing with language problems

Ting reported clear improvement in her language skills at Level 6, particularly regarding listening and speaking. However, she did not seem to make special effort to address her problems with reading and writing, possibly due to her contentment about what she had achieved.

Ting said that she experienced “a qualitative change” in her language skills in TB2, Level 6 (TI.3; TI.5): She no longer needed to record the lectures since she could follow the teachers in all classes except for Payment and Law (TI.4). She could communicate with native English speakers more confidently at Level 6, which formed a contrast to Level 5, when she “did not dare to pick up the phone when it was a landline number” because she “was unable to talk with native speakers” (TI.5).

However, she reported that reading continued to be weak due to her limited vocabulary (TI.3). She appeared to be dealing with this issue by natural acquisition, which means that she remembered the special terms through repeatedly encountering them (TI.3). Likewise, she did not extend her reading beyond her assignments. These could be some reasons why she continued to experience some language problems. Similar to coping with other aspects of learning, she reported seeking academic help mainly from her Chinese compatriots:
Sometimes due to language problems, teachers may not understand me and I do not understand them. So I ask classmates who are better than me. I do not ask teachers unless it is absolutely necessary. Basically, all my problems come down to language. I will go back and search through books and solve them on my own. If I still do not understand, at least, it provides me with some clues when the teacher explains the problem to me (TI.4; TI.5).

Seeking support from peers may have helped solve contingency problems and prevented her from suffering from possible loss of academic self-esteem in front of teachers. However, her reluctance to discuss with the teachers also prevented her from gaining the expert instructions which her peers might not have possessed. For example, she reported that her “Chinese way of thinking” and “poor English grammar” in writing continued to obscure the messages she intended to convey in her essays (TI.4).

Despite her language problems, however, she remained positive about her learning at Level 6. Speaking of her language issues, Ting told me that “Language is a very small issue, which will be OK eventually. When I realize it’s a small issue, very soon, I will have become so used to it that I feel the difficulty will just disappear” (TI.3). Using positive thinking as an adaptive coping strategy helped Ting to maintain the self-efficacy beliefs that she might well have generalised into other areas which presented challenges. This can be evidenced by her dealing with the examinations too.

6.4.6 Dealing with examinations

Examinations can cause anxiety among Chinese students, who are used to passing examinations by rote-learning (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Ting, however, reported never experiencing such anxieties with UK examinations (TI.3). She shocked me by saying that it was “so easy” to do (TI.3). Clearly, her self-efficacy came from her strong belief in self-regulation:

It’s because I have my own plans. As long as I act on my plans, I will pass. I always make plans well ahead, over several weeks before the exam, so that I know exactly what I am supposed to do every day. A day before the exam, I go over everything. I do not like the feeling of emptiness or no plan in my mind (TI.3).

Ting repeatedly stressed that she resented rote learning (TI.2; TI.4; TI.6), which tends to be characteristic of the Chinese examination system (2.2). In the UK, Ting experienced freedom from rote learning. The congruity between her preferred learning style (learning through understanding) and the requirement by the UK assessment provided the opportunity for her to learn via deep learning:

Unlike the Chinese examination where you have to do rote learning, the examinations in the UK are relatively easy to me. You go to every class, and follow the teacher. They do not tell you what is to be tested in the examination, but they stress certain theories that are very important. Listening to teachers is very important, so you can do the revision after class…. I study hard for the examinations. When I
read the PowerPoint slides, I can recall what the teachers talked about in class. If I cannot remember, I refer to books...I never try to rote learn. I only use questions as a test after reading (TL.4).

Her investment in effort and time, consulting the books and striving for understanding are clear indications of deep learning, while her time management and alertness to the assessment requirements are typical of what Entwistle terms ‘strategic approaches to learning’ (McCune & Entwistle, 2000). The combination of both contributed to her passing the examinations:

*I did not learn in China in the past. But once I started to learn, I went directly to deep learning. I want to learn something, and make it my own (TL.4; TL.5).*

Ting’s learning experience supports the literature which maintains that students’ adoption of certain approaches to learning is affected by their perceptions of the learning environment (Biggs et al., 2001). Indeed, Ting attributed her dramatic change from not studying at all in China to investing all her time and effort in her studies in the UK to the different UK learning environment, where fairness was guaranteed:

*It’s because of the different educational systems. In China, no matter whether you study well or not, everybody graduates with a degree showing no differences. Here in the UK, however, there is a grading system, which is closely related to your further studies, your Master’s and PhD. Also in the UK, teachers do not show favouritism. So you have to work hard to earn your credits (TL.5).*

Ting’s growing maturity might also have helped to contribute to her changes from amotivation in China to intrinsic motivation in the UK. It is likely that as she matured and internalised her social goals, with academic achievement being an important one in Chinese society, she understood the significance of making sustained effort to reach her goals. A supportive learning environment, such as merit based on effort rather than favouritism (TL.6) also contributed to Ting’s intrinsic motivation with high expectations and self-efficacy. With a consistent learning goal, she also started to address her essay issues at Level 6.

6.4.7 Addressing essay problems

Having improved her language, Ting had now directed her focus on essay writing at Level 6. The pursuit of a learning goal in combination with a performance goal is evident in her use of teacher feedback and learning from proof-reading to improve her learning and her academic scores.

6.4.7.1 Making use of feedback

Ting’s most significant change regarding the use of feedback came with her Project, where she exhibited strong signs of deep learning under the instructions of her Project tutor. Deep learning enabled several aspects of improvement in her essays, including her skills in structuring, citation and grammar. She
seemed to learn how to follow the English writing conventions by using appropriate citations for the first time. She reported no longer taking patch-writing for granted (TI.1; TI.2), understanding that “as long as they are other people’s opinions” (TI.4), she should use references because her Project teacher was “very strict on this” (TI.4). Interestingly, while the emphasis on proper citation in academic writing started from the PSE course, her confidence in essay writing through patch-writing at Level 5 suggests that she did not fully comprehend the issue until she reached Level 6. Ting’s development in writing supports the argument by Howard (1999) that patch-writing is a developmental process, as it not only provides “a means of students’ writing”, but also is “at the heart of writing itself” (p.7). Ting’s progress also echoes Norton and Norton’s (2001) finding that students can understand academic essay writing better as their courses progress.

Ting improved her writing from teacher feedback. By talking with the tutor, she realised that she often bewildered the tutor by her “Chinese way” of presenting ideas, which is to put “flowery language” at the beginning, so she started to “use English to think and write” (TI.4). However, the transition was not easy. She said she would “go back to the Chinese way of thinking during the writing process again” (TI.4), which was evident in her Project draft, which will be discussed later.

Ting’s experience was not unique. Although a Chinese argumentative essay may also adopt deductive reasoning, it “exhibits a consonant preference for inductive reasoning”, which means that the argument follows the sequence of “because—therefore” (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2012, p.140). This is in contrast to Western argumentation, which adopts inductive reasoning following the sequence of “therefore—because” (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2012). Chinese students tend to struggle with academic essay writing when studying in the UK. Since “few teachers have developed a high ability in writing in English” in China, Chinese students may confuse their British teachers with their inductive pattern of writing for a lack of adequate practice in their previous Chinese education (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p.18).

Nevertheless, I was still surprised that Ting had not realised the differences between the two writing conventions until Level 6, as I was aware that providing constructive feedback on students’ performance had been general practice within the University. Hence our following conversation on her use of feedback:

I: Do you often read teacher feedback on your essays?

She: Sometimes, but not every time. Sometimes I forget to collect it.

I: Is teachers’ feedback useful to you?

She: I do not think so. As I get the feedback after I have finished the essay, there is no use. Also, there are different requirements for each essay. And the contents vary.

I: What do teachers write in the feedback?
She: The content does not correspond to the title, lacking in cohesiveness, etc. Sometimes teachers do not understand what I have written.

I: What do you do then?

She: I improve. E.g., the Project Teacher gives me detailed feedback, including every mistake. Then I will learn. Especially when she points out: What’s wrong with this? What do you mean by this? After my explanation, she tells me what I should say and then I learn (TI.4).

Feedback should help enhance learning by engaging students in further talks with the teachers (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). However, this had not happened to Ting until the Project. This change seems to be related to the timing and therefore students’ perceived usefulness of the feedback. In Ting’s case, whereas some unit feedback was given after a unit was completed, feedback on the Project was provided on an ongoing basis, which meant clear opportunities for her to improve based on the feedback. Ting’s use of feedback gives further weight to the argument that “(p)erceived relevance or applicability of the feedback was particularly important for students. Utility was identified as a key factor in their engagement with feedback” (Price, Handley, Millar, O’Donovan, 2010, p.282).

Ting preferred to be strategic in learning when there were other tasks to attend to. Ting would implement the detailed and timely teacher feedback because of its relevance to her improvement in marks and would be less focused on it if it was given after the completion of a unit. This may suggest that even students with a growth mindset may not benefit from feedback, if they have a strategic motivation or they do not see the value of it, for example, it is likely to help them with the next assignment. As relevance seems to be essential for student engagement with feedback, enabling students to utilise it before rather than after the completion of a unit seems to be a solution (Jonsson, 2012).

Ting’s changes from resenting teacher’s negative feedback at Level 5, evidenced by her negative reactions to her GL5 unit, to understanding and implementing tutor feedback at Level 6 suggests that she has moved closer towards a growth mindset. Further evidence of this is her seeking self-improvement through proof-reading.

6.4.7.2 Improving writing skills through proof-reading

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), when students feel related or supported as well as competent and autonomous, they are intrinsically motivated towards a challenging task. Ting’s beliefs in a growth mindset seemed to have been strengthened by her Project tutor’s rewarding her effort, motivating her to further improve her Project:

*My Project teacher was strict, but she was very good too. I visited her very often and she would discuss the problems with me until I understood.... And she was fair. She gave students higher marks if they made changes based on the feedback (TI.3).*
From designing to completing the Project, Ting demonstrated a strong learning goal during the process-based learning. Applying what she had learned to practice via her Project motivated her to complete it with interest. Ting’s Project focused on the possibility of introducing a UK product to the Chinese market. From purchasing and distributing sample products to Chinese consumers in China during Christmas, to the completion of the report, Ting completed the whole project through her own effort. Her pride in her own achievement was evident in these remarks:

*I did my experiment and wrote all of it by myself. And I think I have learned a lot. The knowledge I gained may be useful for my future career. I was shocked when all my friends said to me: “Are you silly? Why bother yourself to do it? We just find some Chinese articles and translate them into English”! Others even just bought the whole essay. But I do not regret this. I tried and I learned* (TN.8).

I had a chance to read Ting’s Project draft when I met her in the library in early February 2014. Ting presented her argument with a clear structure and sound rationale. However, the many grammatical mistakes and inappropriate expressions in the text as a result of direct translation from Chinese were also obvious (TN.8).

Conscious of her own limitations in these aspects, Ting eventually paid a proof-reader to improve her writing “*in order to get a higher score and to learn*” (TI.5). She explained that she would not have chosen a native speaker but for the reassurance of a friend that this person had provided a satisfactory service before for other Chinese students. Her worry was that native speakers might change her ideas due to misunderstanding, an impression she gained from going to a LST. As the LST had changed her original meaning while helping her to improve the writing, she stopped using this service after a couple of times (TN.10). To avoid similar incidents, she reported stressing in the email to the proof-reader that “*There are three major problems with the writing, including grammar, expression and logic. But I think my ideas are great*” (TN.10).

Ting was very pleased with the result of the proofreading. She obtained a low 60%, which she considered to be ‘high’ (TN.10). She reported benefitting much from it:

*I learned a lot from the proofreading. Lots of improvement compared with my original draft. I printed off the improved version and highlighted in red the parts that had been changed. There were differences in expression, and also choice of words. There were changes in word order. Also, I had used some wrong prepositions. I will definitely ask for proofreading in the future. I will learn* (TI.5).

Ting’s pursuit of multiple goals at this stage were evident: Her interest in the designing, completing and the effort in improving the Project via implementation of teacher feedback and proofreading indicate a learning goal; her use of proof-reading to improve her mark also indicates a strong performance goal. Ting’s experience supports the argument that multiple goal pursuits of combining
mastery and performance goals can contribute to better learning outcomes (Harackiewicz, et.al, 2000; Linnenbrink, 2005).

6.4.8 Saving face through cheating

Despite her consistent display of a growth mindset and a learning goal, Ting did not apply the same standard to all the units. In particular, she did not even make any effort to write the Payment and Law assessment essay. Instead, fear of failure prompted her to adopt a dysfunctional strategy, cheating, in order to pass the essay assessment (TI.4; TN.7).

My participants invariably expressed their worries about the 2000-word essay for the Payment and Law unit because they could not understand the lecturer (TO.7; TN.2). In contrast, Ting appeared to be undisturbed despite her self-estimation of understanding barely 30% in class and not doing any preparation for this unit (TN2; TN.13). It transpired that she had already found a simple solution—cheating:

Because it’s a law course, it’s really difficult…. I do not know how to write or what to write. I cannot understand this unit because of the teacher’s strong accent. Friends who have taken the course have also warned me that many students failed this course last year…Many of us have decided to find ghost writers to write essays for us, so instead of writing myself and then failing, it’s better to buy one….Also, it’s British law, which could be useless in China. I am planning to use a ghost writer for this unit only. I have asked an MA student who graduated from this university to write this essay for me. I do not want a high score, around 50% is OK (TI.3).

Ting’s justification for using cheating as a coping strategy suggests that her self-efficacy in passing this unit was very low. Although she had consistently showed a growth mindset, she found herself in a situation where she could find no strategies to apply to this particular unit, or at least none that would enable her to pass in the time that she had. This again indicates her strategic motivation, carefully assessing what is achievable within the time. Driven by fear of failure, which also means losing face (6.3.1), she opted for cheating. To avoid being detected by the teachers, Ting paid a friend (who had graduated with a Master’s degree from the same university) £100 to write the essay for her (TI.4), saying that she knew this friend’s academic ability and trusted her:

Her course was related to law and she obtained around 50% for almost all her units. So I knew what mark I could get if she wrote it for me (TN.7).

Ting reported feeling “extremely happy” to learn that she had obtained a 43%, because “many students have failed”, and those who obtained high marks through cheating were anticipating in fear being asked to see the teacher” (TI.4). Securing a pass grade left Ting contented and relieved:
Although the mark is not high, my requirement was to pass. It’s better than being asked to see the teacher and then failing (TL4).

Although I had heard of students buying essays to pass this unit during my interviews, still the candid revelation of cheating by Ting was unsettling. More unsettling was the fact that she started with high self-efficacy and she initially maintained a growth mindset in the face of challenges. The fact that even a student with a growth mindset would resort to cheating suggests that a growth mindset cannot protect students from adopting this extreme self-protection strategy to survive when their self-efficacy in strategy use is extremely low.

Indeed, Ting’s academic self-efficacy seemed to have been somewhat lowered at Level 6 through social comparison, say that “the more I study, I more I realise that my ability is limited. Compared with others, there indeed exist some differences” (TL4). According to Bandura (1993), when seeing one is surpassed by others, self-efficacy decreases via negative social comparison. Social comparison further lowered Ting’s possibly already low self-efficacy in coping with this particular unit due to a lack of understanding.

Alongside this depleted self-efficacy was her strategic approach. Just as pointed out by the literature (Becker & Hughes, 1995), students’ major concern about their academic life is the grades, which tend to be dominated by the academics. That is, the contents of the assessments tend to be decided by the teachers, over which students might not have control. This means that when there is no time for learning, performing should take precedence. Likewise, Ting made a strategic calculation about what was possible in the time available. The widespread rumour that was passed down from students of previous years only intensified her fear of failure, leading to her focus on performing to protect herself from losing face. Ting’s behaviour resembles that of a fixed mindset found in some students, who look for self-protection via malfunctioning strategies. It may suggest that students with a growth mindset can also be vulnerable when pressurised by challenge or failure.

Ting’s susceptibility to the power of consensus decision making in the crowds, that is, the informed members of a group influence the direction of the group movement (Dyer et al., 2008), also suggested her movement towards a fixed mindset. Her seniors acted as the informed members. Having gained experience about this particular unit, they passed the messages on to some of the Chinese students who were taking this unit, which contributed to Ting, who temporarily lost her confidence in passing via effort or strategies, resorting to cheating in order to avoid failure.

Buying essays by international university students studying at UK universities seems to have been on the increase in recent years (Coughlan, 2008). Ting’s case also indicates that despite the heavy penalty policy involved in academic dishonesty, students may continue to take the risk due to the pressure of
obtaining their degrees and fulfilling their social obligations to their parents, who have invested heavily in their education:

*I must study hard in order not to fail. Perhaps it’s because I have more pressure here. After all, my parents have spent a huge amount of money to send me to study here. Not only will my parents and I lose face if I go back to China without a degree, but it’s also not worth two years’ time for nothing. I would rather have spent the money elsewhere. After all, I have travelled so far to come here in order to learn something, so if I learn nothing, I have actually lost a lot* (TI.4).

Ting’s expressions such as “*must study hard*, “*more pressure*”, “*huge amount of money*” and “*lose face*” indicate the pressure as well as motivation from her strongly internalised social goals. For this particular unit, however, Ting failed to derive meaning out of it due to the fact that she found the teaching boring and the messages incomprehensible. Fear of failure as a result of loss of self-efficacy motivated Ting to cheat for self-protection and for fulfilling her social goals.

6.4.9 Achieving satisfaction about the course

Despite all of the difficulties, Ting seems to have become increasingly more appreciative of her course at Level 6 (TI.4). This change was also associated with more signs of deep learning and better metacognitive strategies in learning, as evidenced by a comparison between her comments on her course at Level 5 and at Level 6. Ting’s view of her course at Level 5 was low:

*This course is too low standard. My IELTS was so low that I had to come to this course. Only those who are rejected by the Business School come here, including those who have failed* (TI.2).

This forms a contrast to her satisfaction at Level 6:

*I think ITBC is a good course because it covers a wide range of knowledge. For my Master’s, I can choose a specific subject, but since I have learned several areas during my undergraduate course, it will help my Master’s* (TI.3).

Feeling supported by the University that provided “*very good at humanistic care*” (TI.3), Ting decided to pursue her Master’s degree from the same University:

*I find it’s easy to deal with everything here. Teachers that I know here are very nice. When you have difficulties, they will help you out, either in study or in other aspects* (TI.3).

Clearly, a supportive environment strengthened a growth mindset, leading to her problem-focused strategies, for example, self-reflection:

*I have gone through huge changes... After I came to the UK, I never avoided a problem as I knew I had to think of ways to solve it.... I have reflected on both my study and my life. If I have made even small
mistakes in my study. I ask myself: What’s wrong? Is there an internal or external reason for this? I do not dwell on a mistake; instead, I learn the lesson (TL5).

6.5 Summary and discussion

6.5.1 Summary

Ting achieved an overall satisfaction with her study, thanks to her multiple pursuits of both a learning goal and a performance goal. Although she resorted to cheating on one occasion, Ting demonstrated an overall strong growth mindset over her two-year course of study. This mindset directed her to cope with her challenges with flexibility and positivity: She employed adaptive coping strategies including strong self-regulation (investing effort and managing time), seeking help from more able peers and later from teachers, engaging in self-reflection and deriving meaning out of stressful events. Her multiple goal pursuits from an early start led to her overall satisfaction with her learning outcomes. Table 6.3 below summarises Ting’s two-year academic coping, based on which I discuss the three research questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
<th>Level 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic difficulties</td>
<td>Language skills and essay writing</td>
<td>Language skills and essay writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>Growth mindset, demonstrating strong global academic self-efficacy</td>
<td>Growth mindset; a life balanced by Taoism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Multiple goals (learning goal, performance goal and social goal)</td>
<td>Multiple goals (learning goal, performance goal and social goal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main coping strategies</td>
<td>Effort; self-regulation, including time-management and seeking help from able peers; patch writing to cope with essays; positive restructuring; emotional avoidance in GL5</td>
<td>Effort; self-regulation; seeking help from the Project teacher and proof-reader; experiential learning from part-time job; cheating in one unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping style</td>
<td>Problem-focused mainly, but also occasional negative emotional coping (GL5)</td>
<td>Problem-focused, but also avoidance-coping on one occasion (cheating)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with others</td>
<td>Mainly more able Chinese peers, occasionally LSTs</td>
<td>Chinese peers and Project teacher, non-Chinese in class, experiential learning from society, native speaker proof-reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to learning</td>
<td>Strategic, but also signs of deep learning</td>
<td>Deep and strategic learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.3 indicates that despite her initial academic challenges, Ting achieved positive learning outcomes, as reflected in her improved academic scores and satisfaction at her learning. Such outcomes appear to be closely related to her strategy use and approaches to learning. What is characteristic of Ting is her inclinations towards a strong growth mindset, which was also accompanied by positive thinking and problem-focusing coping in a learning environment that met with her needs. By answering the research questions, the following discusses the interplay between the individual, the cultural, and the educational factors that contributed to Ting’s personal growth through her transcultural education.

Q1. What academic difficulties did she experience and how did she cope with them?

Entering the University with a low English level, Ting encountered academic challenges in both language (and therefore integration) and essay writing. However, sufficient evidence from her two-year learning journey suggests that she met the challenges with mostly adaptive coping strategies, including managing her time efficiently, observing good peer practices, seeking help from more able peers, participating in experiential learning, and more importantly, positive restructuring, which she employed to keep herself focused on the task when problems arose.

As argued previously, her problem-focused coping style can be attributed to an apparent growth mindset, which in turn allowed her to maintain a strong academic self-efficacy and consequently, adaptive coping in the face of challenge. Her experience accords with Dweck (2008), who maintains that students with a growth mindset and high self-efficacy tend to invest more time and effort in coping with difficulties, persevering and searching for functional strategies to cope despite difficulties.

Despite her consistent display of a growth mindset, there was a temporary loss of faith in coping with one unit, namely, Payment and Law. Her cheating in this unit is evidence that she relinquished effort as a coping strategy, which may suggest that a growth mindset does not always guarantee deep learning, as other factors also intervene in the learning process. In Ting’s case, her perception of possessing insufficient strategies to cope when pressurised by time and fear of failure became prominent in her thinking. At this point her desire for self-protection seems to have superseded her learning goal.
Q2. What changes did she make and why?

Although there seem to have been few dramatic changes over the two years of Ting’s undergraduate study, there was transformation for Ting as a learner, who had experienced amotivation in China but intrinsic motivation in the UK. While her maturation with the years could have been a contributory factor, one which is beyond the scope of this research, the two likely contributing factors could be the social goal as an internal driving force and the new environment as an external driving force.

The internalisation of the social goal initiated by her father appears to have been the most decisive motivator for her change from amotivation in China to problem-focused coping in the UK. Subsequently, she displayed strong self-regulation in time management, effort-making and concentration despite distractions to achieve her goal (TI.2-TI.5). The literature has suggested that self-regulation, deep approaches to learning and cognitive strategy use are interrelated (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006). Use of these strategies enabled her to overcome the initial educational shock and to become adapted to the requirements of the UK learning environment.

The most significant change seems to be her incorporating a learning goal with a performance goal. Trying to obtain high marks to fulfil her social goal of securing a degree can be regarded as a performance goal, which she managed to achieve by adopting deep and strategic approaches to learning. Combining deep learning featuring learning with interest, understanding with strategic learning featuring good time management, concentration and self-regulation (Entwistle & McCune, 2004) enabled Ting to make steady progress, which further improved her self-efficacy and contributed to problem-focused coping.

Whereas she had displayed strong amotivation due to her perception of rote learning while studying in China, Ting was intrinsically motivated to learn in the UK. Other factors aside, this dramatic change seems to have been closely related to her perception of the ‘style match’ between the UK university teaching and her preferred learning style. Style match, defined as “the absolute one-to-one match of styles between students and teachers” (Zhang, Sternberg, & Fan, 2013, p.226), can affect students’ academic performance. Ting increasingly cherished the academic practices in the UK education system, where deep learning and effort are encouraged and rewarded (TI.5). Accordingly, the perfect learning environment strengthened Ting’s growth mindset and motivated her to adopt adaptive strategies for deep learning and self-improvement.

Q3. How did Chinese culture influence her academic coping?

There are clear indications that Chinese culture influenced Ting’s academic coping. In particular, both social goals and Taoism appear to have guided her coping behaviour.
Social goals can be both motivating and pressurising for Chinese students (3.4.3). The internalisation of her social goal as her own motivated Ting to cope with her academic challenges with consistent effort and strong self-regulation. Her success accords with the literature which maintains that social goals do not necessarily bring students extrinsic motivation or performance goals. Instead, if students can identify their social goals as their own, these social goals can motivate them to invest sustained effort, persevere and engage in deep learning (Ho et al., 2008).

Working hard but also feeling contented with her achievement appears to have been a guiding characteristic in Ting’s coping, reminding one of Taoism (Chang, 2011). She employed problem-focused coping strategies and invested in effort; however, she also avoided exertion and accepted low performance. Whether Taoism, together with the deep-rooted cultural belief, also cherished by her father, that “a girl does not have to aim too high” (TN.11) prevented her from achieving a higher academic level seems to be an area worthy of future exploration.
Chapter 7 Dan’s struggle

7.1 Introduction

I came to know Dan when I observed her General Language Grade 5 (GL5) class in 2012. She was at Level 5, her second year at the University. I noticed that Dan came to every class. She would sit there listening quietly to the teacher; she would join in pair or group discussions, but never asked or answered any questions voluntarily in class. Dan surprised me by her articulateness in our interviews, all conducted in Chinese following Dan’s preference.

Unlike some participants who did not speak of their negative feelings about their course until much later, Dan revealed her frustrations in the first interview. This made me feel that she trusted me and was open to me from the very beginning (DN.1). Her subsequent candid revelations about her learning journey allowed me to explore the conflicts between her own goals and her social goals, and between her approaches to learning and those required by the UK university. More importantly, it allowed me to uncover how an inclination towards a fixed mindset could negatively impact an international student’s learning process, leading to poor learning outcomes and dissatisfaction with learning. Data were gathered mainly through five formal interviews, instant online messages and some informal talks over two years from 2013 to 2014, teachers’ feedback on her course essays, presentations and Project work, and her academic transcript (D.T) collected in 2015. These formed a basis for answering the research questions:

Q1. What academic difficulties did she experience and how did she cope with them?

Q2. What changes did she make and why?

Q3. How did Chinese culture influence her academic coping and learning?

Before I start the narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) of her three-year learning journey using ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973), I will present Dan’s background first, focusing on her past educational experience and family influence using the first-person narrative technique.

7.2 Dan’s Background

*I graduated from a 2-year Chinese college learning marketing in 2011. I liked marketing and aspired to a white-collar job like HR. I was ready to find a related job in China, but my father disagreed. He thought that a college diploma from China was not good enough, so we almost rushed into the decision to come to the UK for further study.

*I have always been very independent as I had been in a boarding school since I was very young. But I am very close to my father. He is always telling me that no matter how much money he leaves me, it will eventually run out. So, as a girl, I must study for my own future instead of relying on others. As a
businessman himself, he knows how difficult it is for a girl to survive in the business world. My boyfriend is also a businessman. That is also a reason why my father thinks I should not get involved in business. He thinks if the man does business then the woman should have a stable job so that her family life can be stable. I accept his ideas as I think he is reasonable (DI.1; DI.2).

My own interest had always been in marketing, but my father thought that a UK business-related course would put extra pressure on me since I did not have much basic knowledge in this area (DI.1). Instead, he suggested that if I study English, I could find a job as an English teacher in China. He believes that if a girl is a teacher, she will not experience so much social pressure as doing business (DI.1).

The agency through which I applied for my overseas study introduced me to this course entitled BA (Hons) Communication and English Studies (hereafter BACES), explaining that its content was similar to that in a teachers’ college in China (DI.1; DI.2). As my goal was to develop myself into an English teacher, I accepted it thinking that I could systematically study English, in particular, grammar, and English teaching methods, so that by the time I graduated, I would speak good English (DI.2; DI.4).

English learning at my former college was just about basic knowledge involving reading, vocabulary, grammar and a little listening. But I had never learned how to write English essays. From preparing for studying abroad to taking IELTS, it took us only several months. I prepared for IELTS for one month, and obtained an overall score of 5.5. I cannot remember the individual IELTS scores but reading was the highest. Since the score of 5.5 was 1 point short of the minimum course requirement, I went to Wuhan University for the Pre-sessional English (PSE) for one month, just enough time to start the University course in September (DI.1; DI.2).

The minimum IELTS score entry requirement was 5.0 in 2011 (5.5 now). Based on Dan’s score, she could have joined the PSE course for two reasons: either because her individual scores did not reach a minimum of 5.0, or because she had met the language requirement, but wished to attend it as a refresher course.

Dan’s own accounts show the instrumental role her father played in her future career path, in this case, learning English to become an English teacher, which he perceived to be a less challenging career. His mentality reflects the pervasiveness of the long-established cultural practice in China. Although by law there should be gender equality since the founding of new China in 1949, the idea that women should be emotionally and practically supporting husbands and children has never retreated from society so that “most Chinese men still expect them to look after home and family more or less single-handed, whether or not they are holding down a job…. Many Chinese men find it psychologically hard to cope with high-earning wives, and if something must give it is usually the wife's job” (Beck, 2011). Dan chose her UK course based on his father’s choice, and she seemed to have internalised her father’s goal
at this stage. However, she was soon to experience conflicts due to her misunderstandings about the nature of her future course of study.

7.3 Emotional turmoil at Level 4

Dan’s impression that the content of her course, BACES was vastly different from her expectations threw her into great emotional turmoil at Level 4. Her inability to understand the lessons only exacerbated the situation. Her struggles can be demonstrated in two main aspects: her challenges in English language and her disillusionment with the course.

7.3.1 The initial academic challenges

Like the majority of international Chinese students studying in an English-speaking country (3.2), Dan immediately sensed the challenges in every aspect from the beginning. In particular, she reported struggling with her language and essay writing:

_The main pressure came from the fact that I could not understand the teachers in class...Listening was problematic. Reading was OK. But writing was very difficult. I did not know what to write. My grammar was very poor and I could not organise sentences clearly_ (DI.1; DI.5).

Apart from reading teachers’ lecture slides to increase her understanding, Dan reported she had not invested special effort to address the language issue. Likewise, although she reported lacking in strategies to structure an essay, her self-report suggests that apart from an occasional visit to a LST before the assessments (DI.1; DI.5), she did not seem to have made any further effort to address this issue. Dan’s coping with the academic issues indicates that she was focusing more on how to cope with the assessment than on how to improve the content of her learning, which is also characteristic of students’ pursuit of a performance goal rather than a learning goal (3.5).

Previous studies suggest that whereas multiple goal pursuits (a combination of learning and performance goals) can lead to maximal learning, students’ single pursuit of performance goals can bring higher scores but not course interest or enjoyment (Harackiewicz et al., 2000). Indeed, the lack of interest in her course from the start left Dan disillusioned and disengaged.

7.3.2 Disillusionment with the course

Dan’s limited understanding of the nature of her course, and the UK teaching styles that conflicted with her preferred learning styles disappointed her from the start:

_It was so different from what I had expected...vastly different from preparing to become an English teacher in China. I had thought it’s about intensive training in English grammar, you know, like the teacher teaching and explaining each grammatical item. But after I came, the situation was totally different. There were great differences between Chinese and UK teaching styles too. UK teachers asked_
us to do group work, and they did not always tell us the answers. I was not used to the UK teaching style when I first came to the UK (DI.1; DN.18).

Clearly, Dan had misconceptions about training programmes for teaching English in China, which generally consist of language, literature, cultural, teaching theories and methods as well as English grammar. However, Dan’s perspectives of the learning process reflect the influence of Chinese education, which is criticised for being teacher-centred and examination-focused, and for regarding learning as a process in which teachers transmit knowledge to students (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). This forms a clear contrast to the UK HE, where knowledge is seen as constructed via the learning process (2.3). Unable to understand this, Dan was probably hoping to receive a teacher-centred education, where teachers would explicitly teach grammatical rules, and she could practise alongside home students to improve her English studies.

However, the inclusion of business contents in addition to a holistic language learning was something Dan had not expected. Her negativity about her course was intensified by the lack of opportunities to study alongside native speakers at Level 4. The fact that she was taking the majority of the units with her Chinese compatriots left her disillusioned, claiming that her course was ‘no different from courses like International Trade and Business Communication’ (DI.1). The misunderstanding of the nature of the course, when combined with the ‘learning shock’ (Gu, 2009) as a result of the transition from Chinese teacher-centred teaching and UK student-centred teaching left her in great emotional distress, so much that she reported “still crying during Christmas” and discussing with her father about abandoning her study (DI.1):

*I was very much disappointed. The first year I came here, I called my father several times, telling him that I did not want to continue. I told him that it’s useless; it’s totally different from what we had expected* (DI.1).

An analysis of the course structure helps to understand Dan’s distress. Both BACES Programme Specification and course structure, which are available to students on the university websites, suggest that this is a linguistics-oriented course, combined with some marketing-and business-related units for its graduates to gain competence in communication and language use in a range of professional contexts. Indeed, over half of the Level 4 units offered in 2011 were linguistics-focused. These include GL and BC units, which were compulsory for international students, most of whom were Chinese. Despite its name, BC is also a language-focused unit in business settings. Apart from these, there were also units related to culture, communication and business.

Apart from the language improvement units aimed at international students, BACES students share several units with home students from linguistics-focused courses such as Modern Foreign Languages and English Language. The shared units, some of which are compulsory, include *English Literature,*
Language, Society and Mind, and Language and Text at Level 4; Meaning in English, The Structure of English and The Language of Literature at Level 5; Communication Theory and Mass Communication at Level 6. All of these units present opportunities for international students to interact with students from a range of backgrounds and therefore, help improve their English in the process.

Failing to understand the aim of her course led Dan to negative emotion coping. She blamed the Chinese agency for misleading her and her father into making the wrong decision. Her strong emotion was indicated by such emotive words as ‘betrayed’ and ‘cheated’ on several occasions:

*I was very much disappointed mainly because the Agency chose to tell us what we wanted to hear....I felt cheated and I was very upset. When I could not understand the teacher, I just wanted to quit and go back to China* (DI.1; DI.2).

Dan’s words reveal that her disappointment with her language problems only deepened her misunderstanding about her course. The fact that she was taking the core units at Level 4 with her Chinese compatriots increased her fear that she could not fulfil the internalised social goal “to learn English grammar alongside native English speakers” (DL.1; DL.5). According to Deci and Ryan (2008), students are intrinsically motivated when their three basic psychological needs are met, the need for competence (feeling that they are able), autonomy (feeling that they are independent), and relatedness (seeing their learning as meaningful and experiencing a sense of belonging). Her low self-efficacy in language skills, lack of appreciation for her course, and dissatisfaction with the teaching styles indicated that the three-aforementioned basic psychological needs were missing, leading to her amotivation in this period.

Amotivation means “having no intentions for the behaviour and not really knowing why one is doing it” (Gagne & Deci, 2005, p.336). Dan’s subsequent vague memory of any details concerning Level 4 except for her emotional disturbances, as she demonstrated in the interview (DL.5), also evidenced her helpless situation at Level 4.

Dan eventually stayed on, following her father’s suggestion that she “*should persist a little longer and see what might happen*” (DL.1). Perhaps his support of her continuing despite the course not enabling her to focus on the social goal began to ease her emotional turmoil, freeing her to explore what else she might achieve from the degree. This waiting was worthwhile. She gradually overcame the state of amotivation as she realised that her own goals (rather than the social goal) of working in marketing could be achieved via her course, and her passing the first UK assessment appeared to be a turning point.
7.3.3 The first UK assessments

Passing her first UK assessment at Level 4 helped Dan to gain some academic self-efficacy. Furthermore, her father’s permission to continue this degree, although not expressed explicitly, implicitly gave her the freedom to follow her own goal, relieving her of the pressure from her social goals. Both factors seemed to have encouraged her to stay on her course and become motivated by a performance goal:

*After the exam, I got the results. All of a sudden, I realized I was capable! So, I felt relieved, knowing that I still had the ability to adapt to this new teaching and learning* (DL.1).

While Dan’s use of words such as ‘relieved’ and ‘adapt’ suggest improved academic self-efficacy, remarks such as ‘capable’, ‘had the ability’ also reveal a fixed mindset. As people with a fixed mindset perceive intelligence as unmalleable, they focus on ‘looking and feeling’ clever rather than actually learning. To achieve this, they will be avoidance oriented, using strategies to protect themselves from looking or feeling that they are not ‘clever’, particularly when faced with difficult tasks or even failure (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Thus, although Dan had moved on from amotivation, she was still not focussing on developing herself (learning) but instead on doing well (performing). The adoption of a fixed mindset means that Dan was likely to adopt avoidance-coping strategies to enable her to look and feel as though she was doing well to hide any lack of performance if she faced challenges or failure.

Dan’s lack of interest in and connection with her course is seen from the absence of self-reflection in the learning process. She received a ‘compensated pass’ for both British Society and British Institutions, which means that she was given credits by the Board of Examiners despite not achieving the minimum pass rate of 40%. She told me that she received a ‘compensated pass’ for British Society because she had booked an early flight back to China, and “had no time to attend the examination” (DL.5). She did take the exam for British Institutions; however, she failed as she “prepared it by going over the test bank and memorising the answers ....and could not answer the essay questions at all” (DL.4). Although she said she had prepared for her future examinations via understanding instead of rote learning (DL.4), there was little evidence for her to apply understanding to other areas of study at Level 4.

At level 4, Dan’s perception of the incompatibility of her goal and the path she was on steered her towards negative emotion-focused coping. Mostly displaying a fixed mindset, Dan adopted malfunctioning strategies such as rumination, procrastination and venting, further exacerbating the problem, as described in the literature (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). A further support for this is her Level 4 academic transcript (D.T), which indicated that she received 40%-50% for all her units, with few differences between TB1 and TB2 at Level 4. It was likely that if she did not change her mindset, her self-efficacy would remain low. This meant she would be at risk of helplessness and self-protection strategies to evade negative judgements of her ability if her self-efficacy failed to rise or worse, dipped.
again, as suggested by the mindset theory (Dweck & Legg, 1988). Or alternatively, as both mindsets and self-efficacy can be changed (3.7.3, 3.8.4), Dan might also have embarked on a different route of development, which will be explored next.

7.4 Reconciliation with the reality at Level 5

Dan was beginning to accept her course at Level 5, when I started to examine her learning experiences. Starting to identify the relevance of her course to her future career helped to lessen the conflicts between her personal goal and her course, and she became less emotion-focused at Level 5. However, with her language obstacles remaining, her self-efficacy in learning appeared to be constantly low.

7.4.1 Frustrated by language issues

As discussed previously, Dan’s fixed mindset and performance goals did not allow her to focus on improving her language skills at Level 4. According to her self-reports, she understood her GL5 classes because “the teacher speaks slowly” (DI.2); by contrast, she had difficulty understanding other units, and had to read teachers’ course notes to assist her understanding after class sometimes, when she “felt like it” (DI.2). Dan’s little effort resulted in her slow improvement in English. However, she attributed this result to the lack of opportunities in using English:

*Since I came, my English level has dropped dramatically (DI.1). Every day, I contact only Chinese people. I am not used to talking with Chinese in English. I do not know what to say....I only communicate with the teachers in English in class; the rest of the time, I talk in Chinese (DI.1).*

On the surface, there appeared to be a lack of opportunity for Dan to communicate in English. Similar to Level 4, there were fewer students from BACES at Level 5. Therefore, these students tended to take GL5 and most optional units with students from International Trade and Business Communication (ITBC), who were predominantly Chinese (DN.19). Believing that the English level of her Chinese compatriots was “low” and that they tended to “just chat in Chinese” (DI.4), Dan did not perceive any benefits from the student-centred classroom teaching which presented many opportunities for peer interactions. Indeed, my observations of her GL5 classes bore little evidence that she had communicated in English with her Chinese peers or teachers (DO.1-DO.5). Dan always sat in the corner and she appeared to be concentrating in class. She would occasionally use the mobile phone to check the vocabulary and wrote down in Chinese in the margins of the handbook. She never volunteered to interact with the teacher except when asked to answer some simple questions (DO.1-DO.5).

There was a mixture of home and international students at Level 5 only in units with a strong linguistics orientation, including The Structure of English (core), Meaning in English (optional), and The Language of Literature (optional) (DN.15). Despite her desire to study alongside home students, Dan did not choose any of these options; instead, she chose business-related units (DN.16). Her choice of
business and culture units contradicted with what she said about learning English to become an English teacher. It is likely that at this point in her degree she had begun to embrace her personal goal of working in marketing. Another explanation of her decision could be her fixed mindset and a related performance goal which would lead her not to embrace the challenge of language learning but to avoid it. Dan’s rationalisation of her decision fits the former explanation but there are also some references to the difficulty of language. Therefore, the latter explanation, which she herself may have been unaware of, should not be ruled out as an influence:

After Level 4, I was thinking that since most of what I was learning involved business, I might as well do business and marketing....I was told that Meaning in English was very difficult and very few Chinese chose it. Instead, we all chose some business- or marketing-related units. I chose BC 2, I chose Marketing and Communication. I thought it’s easier to pass (DN.18).

By avoiding a linguistic-focused unit and choosing units that appeared easy for her reflected a performance goal at work, which also meant Dan’s losing opportunities to study along with home students and to improve her language. Even though she shared The Structure of English at Level 5 with home students, she did not appear to have benefitted much due to her perceived isolation as the only Chinese in this class:

Only when we had group discussions was I able to talk with them as the teacher assigned us into groups. During the group discussions, I could participate. But at other times, you could not expect to join in with them. There was no integration at all. They appeared to have nothing to say to you (DI.1).

The perceived marginalisation by home students prompted her to relinquish the idea of integration. She opted to stay with Chinese students although she was aware of the limitations of studying along with her compatriots (DI.1):

I feel it’s easier to communicate with the Chinese. It’s just so difficult to integrate with the home students. They would not take the initiative to ask something about you. The conversation couldn’t go on (DI.1).

Retreating to the comfortable world of her own nationality, she completed a self-fulfilling prophecy of ‘cultural ghettoization’,

Many studies (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Leask, 2009; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010) suggest that perceived isolation from home students can lead to decreased satisfaction among international students studying in major English-speaking countries. This further creates ‘cultural ghettoization’, described as the tendency for international students studying abroad to stay with their own compatriots because of segregation and marginalization, thus losing the opportunity to improve their knowledge of English language and culture (Brown, 2009). Indeed, while both linguistic and cultural differences could have
triggered Dan’s feelings of isolation, her apparent fixed mindset may have exacerbated this tendency. As argued by the literature, individuals with a fixed mindset do not believe in the possibility of changes in external attributes and therefore, tend to adopt ‘judgement goals’, which means that they may “derive oversimplified, all-or-nothing characterizations from a small sample of actions or outcomes” (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, p.267). Holding a fixed view on home students, Dan did not believe that she could integrate with them, which further led her further towards a path of cultural ghettoization.

Similarly, her perception that she could not control grammar left her resigned to her situation rather than looking for more solutions. It appears that because of her fixed mindset she did not believe that she was capable of making any changes. Thus, the theory and research would lead us to expect Dan did not make attempts to learn and gave up easily when faced with a difficult task (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Obviously, as she left her language problems unresolved, Dan was bound to experience more helplessness when faced with future challenging language-related tasks. This is evidenced by her frustrations over her essay writing.

7.4.2 Struggling with essay writing

Dan displayed clear signs of helplessness in improving her writing at Level 5. She continued to struggle with essay writing but made few changes in her coping strategies. Remaining confused about the essay criteria, she blamed her grammar, saying “I know what to write about. But once encountering grammar, I am stuck” (DI.1). Grammar was something that she perceived to be out of her control:

My English level is not good, so I cannot control grammar when writing. I am always so confused about the tenses. Teachers tell you about the structure, but not about the grammar. They think it’s your responsibility to deal with the grammar. As for my classmates, sometimes they do not even know the grammar themselves so they cannot really help me (DI.1).

Although good grammar is needed for writing, teacher feedback on her essays suggests that compared with content, grammar only constitutes a minor part of the problem. An example is the Professional Communication for Business unit teacher’s feedback on Dan’s report writing. The assessment consists of three parts: presentation (weighting 20%), case study (weighting 30%) and computer-based multiple choice exam (weighting 50%). Dan obtained 53%, 34% and 58% respectively (DN.10). The feedback indicates that the problem was more related to the content than to the grammar: “The content and the style generally not appropriate for the context; content poorly organised; irrelevant information; poor understanding of the subject matter” and “reasonable range of grammatical structures but with errors”. The questionnaire as part of the case study was “limited and does not deal with the issue of business culture” (DN.10).

Such feedback clearly contradicts Dan’s self-reported confidence in knowing “what to write about”. Perhaps attributing her inability to write an essay well to grammar could at least help alleviate her sense
of low self-efficacy in other aspects of writing, which is a form of self-protection. As with Level 4, Dan’s failure to approach her studies with a learning goal meant that she did not or was unable to reflect upon her learning experiences. Had she read and discussed similar essay feedback with the teachers, her confusion about the marking criteria could have been clarified. Instead, she took such negative feedback as a threat to her self-esteem and became self-defensive, which often characterises a fixed mindset: “I prepared Professional Communication for Business very carefully and I got very low marks; I dealt with British Culture very casually and I got a very high mark of 58%!” (DI.1).

Her reaction towards essay feedback also reflects how a fixed mindset means losing opportunities for self-improvement. Dan reported feeling “very disappointed” at the low mark of 34%, after she had “tried hard to prepare it for about half a month, and even designed a questionnaire” (DI.1). She could not accept this negative outcome. With emotional coping taking over, the only remedial work was to ensure that there had been no mistakes in the marking (DI.3).

Studies on university students’ post-error behaviour towards corrective information suggest that students with a growth mindset in contrast to those with a fixed mindset are more attentive to their errors from external feedback (Mangels, et. al., 2012), and are more likely to self-monitor their errors and correct them (Moser et al., 2011). Studies also suggest that students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to self-regulate and correct their errors (Themanson, Pontifex, Hillman, & McAuley, 2011) and students with stronger self-regulation tend to use continuing feedback to evaluate their learning performance (Zimmerman, 1990). Consistently showing characteristics of a fixed mindset (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) led to Dan’s reduced learning opportunities, making it less likely for her to improve her self-efficacy belief in relation to specific tasks. Dan also failed to link her learning outcomes with her changes in strategy, i.e., consultations with the unit teacher and a LST (DI.1; DI.5). Instead, she contributed her high mark for British Culture to sheer luck. As strategy and effort are malleable and controllable, whereas luck is an external cause which is uncontrollable (Weiner, 2010), the attribution of success to external factors also suggests low self-efficacy that is associated with low effort investment (Bandura, 1993).

Dan’s apparent fixed mindset did not allow a learning goal to take place, which means that she was likely to be motivated when her self-efficacy in a task was high, and become amotivated again when her self-efficacy in a task was low. Indeed, just as she reacted with negative emotions when receiving negative essay feedback, so she became helpless when difficult assignments were due.

7.4.3 Resorting to procrastination

As a result of her sense of lack of control over her own habits, Dan displayed helplessness when dealing with essay assignments. Unwilling to invest in effort and with no better strategies, she turned to procrastination:
I belong to those people who do not worry until the last minute. I do not consider something until it turns up. I do not have a sense of urgency until the last minute, when the pressure is so much that I am forced to finish. Even my parents would say I do not react until the last minute. Whatever I do, I have to be pushed (DI.1; DI.3).

Self-regulation is defined as an individual’s capability to exert control over affect, cognition and behaviour in the pursuit of goals (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000) and procrastination has been increasingly regarded as “a failure in self-regulation” (Howell & Watson, 2007, p.168). Theory and evidence suggest that goal orientation and self-regulation are closely related to mindset. A fixed mindset is more likely to be associated with failure in self-regulation, which features procrastination (Howell & Buro, 2009). A fixed mindset left Dan feeling helpless in growth and changes. She seemed to hold negative expectancy regarding her future success, and negative emotions about the learning tasks. Our following conversation further supports this:

I: Do you have a study plan to follow every day?

Dan: No, I don’t. I cannot control myself. Even if I list tasks, I cannot finish them. I know I cannot finish them. I am not self-disciplined enough.

I: Whom do you expect to discipline you then?

Dan: Time will do that. When the time comes, I know I must do it; but if you ask me to prepare a day earlier, I cannot do that (DI.1; DI.3).

Students’ low academic self-efficacy in self-regulation appears to be the leading factor influencing their academic motivation (Klassen, Krawchuk, & Rajani, 2008). Dan’s low self-efficacy in a range of areas such as grammar, integration with home students and in self-regulation resulted in procrastination. Procrastination, like other helpless learning behaviours can lead to low marks (Klassen, Krawchuk & Rajani, 2008), which in turn further lower self-efficacy. “Low self-efficacy beliefs, unfortunately, impede academic achievement and, in the long run, create self-fulfilling prophecies of failure and learned helplessness that can devastate psychological well-being” (Margolis & McCabe, 2006, p.219). This is a cycle that Dan appeared to be involved in.

As demonstrated by Dweck and Grant (2008), people with a growth mindset tend to adopt mastery goals and people with a fixed mindset tend to adopt performance goals. Whereas mastery goals enable people to employ more strategies to tackle the problem when faced with difficulties, performance goals render them helpless in improving. To protect their self-esteem, students with performance goals tend to resort to dysfunctional avoidance strategies. The futile effort that Dan invested in the last minute in Professional Communication confirmed a fixed mindset that effort would not result in changes. Accordingly, she took no active remedial measures to improve her essays; instead, she procrastinated
and until the deadline came. Procrastination inevitably led to intense pressure and emotional stress. Dealing with an essay “as if it was an enemy” and using the word limit as the only goal, Dan described the writing process as “agonizing”:

*My roommate and I ask each other across the rooms how many words we have written down. We try to count the words* (DL.1).

The absence of interest and the pressure of deadlines clearly resulted in ‘down sliding’ in writing, a term used to describe a novice writer who shifts the focus from a higher level (e.g. generating and structuring ideas) to a lower level of writing (e.g., meeting the word limit) (Bruce, Collins, Rubin, & Gentner, 1983, p.28). Worse still, her procrastination even motivated her to the ultimate self-protection strategy, which is academic cheating:

*I did not have enough time to complete all the essays. I went on a trip during last Easter. After I came back, I had three essays to turn in before the end of May, when the exams would be due. There were 10 days left before the deadline. I was worried there wasn’t enough time. So, I decided to buy the most difficult one* (DL.4).

She contacted a Chinese ghost writer on WeChat, a free instant messaging application service. The ghost writer sent half of the essay (*The Structure of English*) within two days:

*The ghost writer sent me the first half, but I was not satisfied with it. I did not use it. I ended up writing the essay myself by sitting up late* (DL.4).

Appearing a little uneasy when telling this story, Dan initially attributed this strategy to a lack of adequate time. Her later explanation, however, indicates that her lack of relatedness to the content of this unit and her low self-efficacy in passing it through her own effort prompted her into adopting cheating as a self-protection strategy:

*I got a low mark for two reasons. I did not understand the class. And I did not make the effort to understand it either because I did not see why I needed to take that unit. It’s a core unit and I had to take it* (DN.8).

Despite having trouble with this unit, her appreciation of the teacher’s teaching and the opportunity to participate in class suggests some sense of relatedness:

*H is a very good teacher, he was passionate, always starting the class with some warm-up discussions, and gave us opportunities to participate* (DN.8).

This discourse reveals Dan’s desire to practise English through discussion and integration with home students, even though she found it difficult to communicate with them (DL.1). She wished to integrate
with home students but was restrained from doing so by her drive to self-protect and avoid difficult tasks. Hence, her pleasure at having someone else force her to do so in a supported environment.

7.4.4 Negotiating her personal goal

Dan’s reservations about the course structure, her perception of the lack of opportunity to integrate with home students persisted in TB2, Level 5:

*I still do not feel it is ideal, because the course seems to be a kind of patching up of all other courses. I shared only one unit (Structure of English) with non-Chinese students. But it’s only in TBI .... This TB, all units are the same as those offered to the ITBC course. This helps little in terms of English learning... But even if you study with non-Chinese, they do not want to communicate with you either (DI.1).*

It was not until later at Level 5 that Dan seemed to be accepting of the reality of her course, and eventually reconciled it with her personal goal. This started with her considering doing a Master’s degree in the UK. When Level 5 started, she was still hesitating about whether she would pursue a UK Master’s degree due to the conflict between fulfilling her social goal of becoming a teacher and pursuing her personal goal of doing business:

*I do not want to continue if the situation is like this. I will feel disappointed. It’s a waste of time. I may as well go back to China to find a job.... I will decide in the final year, after TBI (DI.1).*

The doubts about which path to pursue, however, dispersed more quickly than she had expected. In the interview conducted two weeks later, she told me that rather than accepting the social goal designed by her father, she had decided to “rebel” and pursue her own dream of doing something related to business:

*I really benefited a lot from our talk last time. I discussed the issue with my father. He wanted me to take part in the Chinese Civil Service Exam if my course is not related to teaching. He wants me to have a stable job.... I told him I didn’t like that idea. Personally, I do not want to live a calm life. I want something more exciting, perhaps business or marketing (DI.2).*

Our talk obviously led Dan to quicken the process of decision-making. She reported feeling “contented” about having her own goal of pursuing a business or marketing-related path and obtaining a Master’s degree in the UK (DI.2).

7.4.5 Becoming contented with life

Dan expressed general contentment in her life towards the end of Level 5. Deciding to focus on her personal goal contributed to an overall sense of satisfaction despite her continued experience of difficulties with language and essay writing. Although her consistent pursuit of a performance goal did not allow for development in learning strategies, it did motivate her to obtain strategies to manage
performance: She learned to compensate for the low marks achieved in essays with higher marks achieved in the examinations.

More specifically, while she was dealing with the essays through surface learning, she appeared to be temporarily adopting a deep approach to study for the examination at Level 5:

*Exams in the UK are easier than Chinese ones….Here you are not told which ones have more than one right answer, so you have to understand them when preparing for the examinations. I try to understand them when I prepare for them because in the exams, sometimes the questions are not taken directly from the test banks. You cannot just recite the answers (DI.4).*

Without doubt, the English examinations focusing on understanding rather than rote learning did affect Dan’s changes in her approaches to learning, showing that students may vary their approaches to learning based on their perceptions of a course requirement (Kember, 2000). However, it seems that Dan only used understanding, a sign of deep learning, as a compensatory strategy for offsetting low marks from essays. An example is Dan’s obtaining an overall pass marks for units such as Professional Communication for Business, and Marketing and Communication (DI.4). Therefore, although she focussed on improving her strategies for managing her performance instead of improving her learning strategies, Dan still achieved slow progress at Level 5, with low 50% across almost all units (D.T). Such results helped to increase her academic self-efficacy and contentment with her university life:

*I feel at first I wasn’t able to write a lousy essay but now I am able to write a lousy one. It is always difficult to write an essay, but I always force myself to write. Eventually, when the deadline comes, I can always complete it….Because once you are used to the learning mode, you accept it calmly. Unlike at Level 4 when I felt lost whenever the assignment was due, now I know when I should turn in the assignment and when I should prepare for it. I am adapted to it. I like the environment here. There is no pressure in life, no economic pressure, no reason for me to be unhappy. Many young people of my age have to face lots of social pressure, like finding a job. I am worry-free here every day (DI.1; DI.2).*

Dan’s changes from emotional disturbance at Level 4 to her contentment at Level 5 also echoes other studies. Brown (2009), for example, suggests that international students from East Asian countries reported enjoying while studying in the UK thanks to the freedom of choice, which comes from the contrasts they feel between the two cultures. Whereas students have to meet the in-group demands from a collective culture like China, they can be autonomous on a daily basis in an individualistic culture like the UK. Likewise, Dan’s self-reports also indicate that with her perception of her adaptation to UK university life, her improved self-efficacy due to her strategy for managing her performance, and her adoption of her personal goals, she began to enjoy the freedom of choice as part of her learning experience. One would expect her to embark on a new learning journey from this point, where she
could be more intrinsically motivated and self-regulated. These potential changes are to be explored at Level 6.

7.5 Continual academic struggle at Level 6

Signs of positive change started to emerge at Level 6 as Dan set a clear goal (albeit still a performance goal) and improved her self-efficacy. However, attributing her performance to external forces that were beyond her control indicates that she was still holding a fixed mindset. Her failure to move to a learning goal also meant that her academic motivation fluctuated with the difficulty of the different units. While in TB1 she was motivated by her goal of achieving higher marks to enable her entry to a UK Master’s course in business, she relapsed back to avoidance coping (procrastination) in TB2, when she saw the futility of making significant changes within a short time span.

7.5.1 Frustration by incompatibility with teaching styles

Compared to Level 4 and Level 5, Dan appeared to be less cheerful and less eager to talk during the first interview in TB1. Negativity about the units and helplessness from her low language ability seemed to permeate the interview (DN.3). She expressed her disappointment at the teaching in some units, including BC3, Translation Theory and Practice (TTAP), and GL6. She also showed concerns about Communication Theory (CT) due to its difficult content (DI.3). Consequently, I observed these lectures and seminars, with the observation details summarised in Table 7.1:

Table 7.1: Dan’s class observations at Level 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit and Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Dan’s Behaviour</th>
<th>Dan’s Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DO.6 CT 10/10/13</td>
<td>Functions of language, approx. 60 Chinese and home students, who are sitting separately by nationalities. Teacher talks loudly and clearly. Most students are concentrating. Some Chinese students occasionally check vocabulary on their phone. Some home students also ask teachers questions during the lecture.</td>
<td>She is missing from this class.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Task</td>
<td>Description</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO.7 CT</td>
<td>Theoretical models on functions of language. Same class as before, similar seating. A different teacher, who appears to be very enthusiastic, talking faster than the previous lecturer. There are teacher-student interactions and peer discussions. Lecturer’s PPT slides illustrating the different theoretical modes. Teacher uses real life examples to illustrate abstract concepts. Chinese students sitting around me use their mobile phone to check vocabulary.</td>
<td>Sits in Row 2 and appears to be focused, reading her printouts occasionally during lecture. Occasionally she uses her phone to check the vocabulary. Could understand about half of it. The language was difficult but the content OK; grasped the main idea with help of teaching slides. Read teacher PowerPoint slides after class (DI.4). Likes the seminar, where the teacher mixed Chinese and non-Chinese together for discussion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO.8 BC 3</td>
<td>Hotel booking Seminar of 21 Chinese students. Activities involve one group’s presentation, group discussions on hotel booking, pair work on filling in a booking form, and individual booking a hotel by email. Each activity is presented by teacher giving vocabulary explanation, peer discussions and teacher feedback on both presentation and email, but few teacher-student interactions.</td>
<td>Throughout most activities, some students do not engage in peer discussions. They appear either to learn by themselves or get distracted by their phones, particularly in the second half of the lesson. Dan discusses with her neighbour, but mainly focuses on her own writing without listening to the teacher. Teacher is “too particular and strict. A bit fussy. We all feel frustrated” (DI.3) Feels unsure about presentation preparation and outcome not knowing “which point you might impress the teacher. You feel it’s good, but not necessarily the teacher” (DI.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO.9 TTAP</td>
<td>Sentence translation Seminar room. Chinese teacher uses both English and Chinese in teaching. Many translation exercises. He engages the students in translation skills by choosing some seemingly simple but difficult sentences to translate. The majority of students stay focused, with a few browsing on their mobile phones.</td>
<td>She is concentrated. Apart from short intervals of discussion, she is very quiet. Dislikes the class. Feels bored. The two Chinese teachers are just too rigid and use negative remarks when students give wrong answers. English teachers provide you with many choices. They will not scold you even if you have made a mistake. They encourage you first.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In general, there were not many differences between Level 6 and Level 5 regarding Dan’s class behaviour. Her quietness made it difficult to tell what was going on in her mind except that she seemed to be focussed on the subject under study. She appeared to be studying on her own most of the time, although she also discussed with her classmates when required. What was interesting was her reactions towards BC3 and GL6, both of which she expressed her frustrations about due to the teaching styles.

Dan was displeased with the teaching of her BC3 class (DI.3). I thought the feedback on grammar was what Dan had previously expressed wanting; yet, Dan did not seem to show any interest when the opportunity presented itself.

Dan also complained that her GL 6 class was “the most boring” because of peer discussions:

*The teacher’s way of teaching is every time he enters the classroom, he will ask us to do group work, 4-5 people together. He will not say anything, just stand there watching us to discuss the questions in the handbooks, one after another. Then he will ask us to swap groups and continue to discuss, till class is over. He does not give us the correct answer, but the results of the discussions could be the students’ ideas, which happen to be the same, so they might not always be the correct answers. Sometimes we do not even know where we are and are asked to continue with the next, very fast. We feel lost. We all feel helpless and frustrated (DI.3).*

Although I did not observe Dan’s GL6 class, I did observe another GL6 class taught by the same teacher. Featuring student-centred teaching, the teacher would give instructions and then ask students to solve problems through peer discussions (DN.3). As for the answers, apart from the open questions, students could find the rest by themselves on Moodle, which Dan also confirmed in a later interview (DI.4).

Dan’s preference for a teacher-centred language teaching style that she demonstrated at Level 4 (7.3.2) continued to influence her at Level 6. Interestingly, she did not like what seemed to be very much teacher-centred teaching demonstrated by her BC3 and TTAP classes, and neither could she accept the GL6 teacher’s CLT style focusing more on the fluency than on the accuracy of the language either. This may suggest that Dan was beginning to experience changes in her conceptions of learning.

7.5.2 Subtle changes to performance goals and the development of self-regulation

A performance goal appeared to be a clear motivation for self-regulation for Dan in TB1. Her expressions such as ‘must’, ‘cannot afford to get relaxed’ and ‘crisis’ are indications:

*I am going to apply for my Master’s and I must get credits, so I cannot afford to get relaxed. I did not experience such urgency either at Level 4 or at Level 5.... I am still on track for a 2.2 degree. I want higher marks (DI.3).*
At this point it is noteworthy to explore the literature that suggests two types of performance goal—performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals. In contrast to a performance-avoidance goal, a performance-approach goal can motivate students to mobilize their effort and strategies because of their need to succeed (Covington, 2000). Dan now appeared to have moved away from procrastination associated with her low self-efficacy in writing in the past (a performance-avoidance goal) and to be motivated to self-regulate in essay writing for the first time (a performance-approach goal):

The biggest change in me so far is in dealing with assignments. I do not have to wait. Last year I would not start to think about or write assignments till the last minute. But now, I am starting to think about them earlier and search for sources earlier. I also study in the library more often. Last year, I seldom went to the library (DL3).

As Dan’s self-regulation in organising time and selecting places to study was still steered by a performance goal, albeit a performance-approach goal, she continued to exhibit a fixed mindset and adopt surface and strategic approaches in her study. Her relapse into amotivation in TB2 as a result of negative essay feedback is evidence to this.

7.5.3 Relapsing into amotivation in TB2

As revealed by her interview in TB2, Dan seemed to be losing the momentum gained in TB1, after she received an offer for a Master’s degree course in Business Management from a Top 20 UK university. Just as described by the literature, individuals with a fixed mindset experience emotion draining after completing a challenging task (Job et al., 2010). With her performance goal achieved, Dan seemed to have little to pursue, and relapsed in TB2 into amotivation and emotional coping typified by procrastination and wishful thinking.

Dan received an offer for her Master’s in early March 2014 (DL4). One would have expected that she might have become more academically self-efficacious, and therefore, more motivated in TB2 as a result. However, the very achievement of her personal goal seemed to have created in her a state of ‘ego depletion’, which supports existing research showing that this can happen with individuals’ perception that they have exhausted their limited resources for self-regulation, and therefore, feel unable to exert more self-control in subsequent tasks (Job et al., 2010). The marks that she had received in TB1 appeared to be the start of Dan’s low motivation:

I am not satisfied. Most of them are around 50, and very few are over 60. I can only achieve a 2.2 not a 2.1 degree. I wish I could have achieved higher (DL4).

Theory and evidence suggest that in contrast to people with a growth mindset, those with a fixed mindset will easily relinquish their goals and relax their effort when faced with setbacks (Dweck, 2006). To Dan, underachieving in the tasks was an indication of her lack of ability. To preserve her self-esteem,
she blamed the teachers for her uneven marks, and legitimized her assertion based on the two different essay marks, Professional Communication at low 30% and British Culture at low 60% that she received at Level 5:

*Teachers will see an essay from different perspectives. Sometimes you think it’s good, but you get 40; sometimes, you don’t think it’s good, yet you get 60-70. Who knows? I feel it depends on individual teachers. Teachers here give marks based on their criteria. Some teachers give the whole class very high marks, and some very low marks. It’s always like this* (DL.4).

Although there might be differences in marking among university lecturers, Dan still seemed to have missed the whole picture. As a part-time lecturer at the University, I am keenly aware that the University has adopted a strict marking policy to ensure fairness for students. In particular, all fails (lower than 40%) are automatically double-marked. *Professional Communication*, for which Dan received at 34%, was indeed double-marked (DN.10) and, as discussed at Level 5, the detailed comments justified such a low mark. Rather than continuing to try, which might also have further endangered her self-esteem, Dan responded to her impending academic tasks with helplessness. Her use of procrastination and wishful thinking suggest avoidance-coping, which has been discussed in the literature (Skinner et al., 2003):

*I feel so tense every day. Just feel there is not enough time. Just because there are too many assignments, I just put them aside and do not want to start them. With greater pressure, I do not want to do anything…. I just feel so fed up. Why do I have to turn in homework day after day? I just feel everything is such a mess….If it is not difficult, I can manage to write. If it is difficult, then it’s a kind of escape. I just think, after all, things will work out. If it’s due on Thursday, there is enough time for me to start on Wednesday* (DI.4).

Her reported co-existence of anxiety (a high state of physiological arousal) and boredom (a low state of physiological arousal) can be attributed to a fixed mindset. As highlighted in the literature, a low self-efficacy in coping strategies, and high fear of failure are associated with a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006), the two factors contributed to Dan’s anxiety. Boredom was being invoked as a self-protection strategy to explain her lack of motivation and performance, rather than allowing the perception (of self and others) to see that she was not ‘clever’ enough to cope with this academic challenge.

Another explanation is that boredom is misused here to express extreme helplessness in the form of apathy. Previous research (Job et al., 2010) indicates that it is not boredom, but perception of ego depletion that has caused the feeling of depletion. People with a growth mindset believe that their self-control is limitless (non limited-resource theory), and therefore, they can mobilise their self-regulation even after an exhausting task. In contrast, people with a fixed mindset believe that their self-control is
limited (limited-resource theory), and therefore, they are poorer in self-regulation when faced with high and continued demands on self-regulation.

Indeed, Dan continued to describe herself as incapable of self-regulation, saying that she could not keep to her study plans because she had “extremely low self-control” (DI.4). Moreover, she saw her low ability in self-regulation as a fixed personality trait: “I have known I have had very low self-control since a young age. I cannot control myself” (DI.4). Under the influence of the limited-resource theory, she was likely to consider it an ordeal to secure a place for her Master’s degree course, for which she had exerted herself to the limit. Accordingly, subsequent academic tasks would only appear too much for her to cope with. Unable to resolve the conflict between her desire to perform and her perception of resource depletion, she resorted to negative emotion coping, including venting, seeking emotional social support and disengagement (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989):

*I sometimes believe in energy explosion. I have experienced such explosion. Sometimes I just sit there doing nothing and thinking nothing. I do not have the mood to watch TV or to do anything else. The mind seems to go blank. I have felt like this recently. I feel so low and unsettled. I have talked with my friends…. I do not know how I have survived it*(DI.4).

A similar vicious cycle that Dan had experienced at Level 5 seemed to be evident at this stage: Her apparent fixed mindset led to her belief in limited coping strategies, which means that she would resort to negative emotion coping when difficulties arose. Although her seeking emotional support helped her through the emotional crisis, the underlying reason for her low self-efficacy in self-regulation and strategy use remained unchanged. It was likely that she might have reversed back to helplessness in case of future challenges, unless she changed her mindset.

7.5.4 Development in essay writing

Dan’s essay writing skills improved at Level 6. Dan’s development could have been the result of her increased understanding of English essay writing over the years, which is also supported by Norton and Norton (2001), who suggest that while first-year students often struggle to understand what is meant by developing a good argument in writing, they may have better understanding of this concept as they progress through their degree study to their final year. However, Dan’s continual holding of an apparent fixed mindset meant that such development could be limited.

Dan reported reading teachers’ essay feedback more often at Level 6, from which she gathered that “the problems are related to grammar or to arguments that are not correct” (DI.3). This suggests that she has moved on from the sole preoccupation with lower level—grammar—at Level 5 to higher level learning elements (argumentation). However, her awareness of her weakness in this area did not prompt any subsequent action, which meant that moving to a performance-approach had not moved her any
closer to a learning goal. Indeed, it seems that a performance goal (securing high marks) prevented her from engaging herself in deep learning:

_The moment I get the feedback, I will read the mark. I will try to work out whether I can pass the unit based on the weighting of the essay.... When I do not get a good mark for the essay, I begin to worry about whether I can do well in the exam. If not, I will fail the whole unit. So, I start to prepare for the exam and leave the essay issue aside (DI.3)._ 

Dan may have been giving more time and attention to exams in order to obtain better grades. However, she had not moved on from her performance-oriented coping strategy of using exams to compensate for essay performance, nor had she shown signs of attempting to develop her essay writing abilities. While her strategic distribution of time and energy might have been effective in helping her pass a unit, it had reduced her opportunity to make use of the feedback to improve her writing (a learning goal). This failure to engage in feedback supports previous findings (Mangels et al., 2006) indicating that a fixed mindset will lead to a lack of focus on feedback that could support development. As arguments appear to be the main concern of UK University tutors (Norton, 1990), Dan’s focus on easy tasks and ignoring feedback on arguments also indicates that if student hold more of a fixed mindset, teachers’ effort in helping them improve their learning via feedback is wasted. Indeed, she reported dealing with grammatical issues at best:

_I will improve my grammar. I search online for the errors that I have made. Sometimes I will remember but sometimes not (DI.3)._ 

Likewise, driven by a performance goal, she rarely engaged in deep discussions with teachers regarding her essay problems. Instead, she would turn to peers for clarification:

_I feel agonised when I do not understand the essay topic. I ask the teachers sometimes. But the UK teachers do not give you definite answers....For British Culture, I asked the teacher what I should write about. She asked me to write out an outline and show it to her. She said: ‘That’s right’. It was the only occasion when I discussed with the teachers, because I think teachers have explained the requirements in class. Even if I ask them, they will not give me more details. That’s why I will discuss essays with my friends instead. Also, some teachers give different requirements and also more details in other classes. I will discuss with friends and then know how to write (DI.3)._ 

“Syllabus-bound”, which is characteristic of a surface learning approach (Entwistle & McCune, 2004) is evident in Dan’s concern about “what to write” rather than “how to write”. Driven by a performance goal, she would deem any further discussions with teachers futile if such discussions did not lead to definite answers, and therefore, she would rather opt for peer discussion.
While peer discussions may alleviate stress levels, there are precautions concerning the effectiveness of such discussions. As a coping strategy, peer discussions alone can result in “misinformation as rumours tend to proliferate among students, particularly when stress levels are high such as during examination time or when essays are due” (Norton, 1990, p.432). Dan’s lack of competence in searching for sources for her Project at Level 6 was strong evidence of this. She had thought that Google Scholar, an academic search engine with Google was forbidden by the teachers just because her classmates also thought so (DI.3; DI.4). Such misunderstanding also revealed limitations about her understanding in class and discussions with peers.

7.5.5 Emergence of a learning goal

As her course was approaching its end, some signs of a learning goal started to emerge in Dan’s learning. This can be seen from her interpretation of her low essay marks. Rather than using her poor grammar as an excuse (7.4.2), she now associated it with her procrastination, “I delay the assignments to the last minute. That’s also why I cannot improve my marks” (DI.4). This might suggest that she was beginning to connect her coping strategies with her learning outcomes. Similarly, instead of attributing her reticence in class to teachers’ not providing the exact answers (DI.3), now she recognised her inability to ask questions: 

I really did not know what to ask or where to start. Because I could not fully understand the lessons, I felt it’s very difficult. As I wrote, I felt it’s getting more confusing, so I just continued to mess around it before I turned it in (DI.5).

This indicates that Dan began to use metacognitive strategies in her learning, which were also accompanied by signs of a learning goal. Her dealing with the Project was an instance:

It’s hard to find sources for the literature review…. The teacher is very interested in the topic. She will not improve my grammar, but she will point out the direction…. The tutor asked me to read books, but she did not give me suggestions regarding what books to read…. The Project is more difficult than essays. Grammar is the most difficult for me. I have ideas, but sometimes I make grammar mistakes (DI.4; DI.5).

Still, Dan’s conceptions of learning still basically remained unchanged, as indicated by her hoping to obtain direct answers from the Project teacher. Still, as teachers’ autonomy support such as taking the time to listen to students’ problems, answering their questions, providing constructive feedback and offering encouragement can contribute to students’ autonomy in learning (Reeve & Jiang, 2006), her personal tutor’s regular meeting to discuss her progress, providing feedback on her Project and showing interest in her topic all contributed to Dan’s self-efficacy in completing her Project, and hence, motivation to expend more effort on the writing process. However, it seems that such awareness came too late for her to resolve her academic issues that she had accumulated over the years.
Indeed, the limited time before her graduation left Dan losing her self-efficacy in achieving a satisfactory outcome, saying that the writing was “just too difficult”. Not knowing how to improve her essay because “the tutor did not say exactly how to improve”, or how to use references properly (DN.5), she eventually paid a native speaker to polish her final draft:

At first, I did not want to as I just wanted to prove that I could do it myself. But later on, the more I wrote, the less confident I became. I had written only shorter essays before, I knew the structure and knew how many marks I could get. But I had never written a paper of this length. I did not want to fail and then repeat the year. Fear of failure prompted me to do that (DI.5).

Dan achieved a rather satisfying score of a low 60% for her project. The Marking Sheet suggests her Project essay “reads well and is otherwise a solid piece of work” despite “some minor mistakes in referencing, argumentation and spelling” (DI.5; DN.6). The difference made by proof-reading was also evidenced by Dan’s own remarks:

I compared the improved draft with my original one, and then checked some paragraphs through an online English-Chinese dictionary and found that the improved version was more coherent when translated into Chinese. In contrast, my original writing could not be translated into coherent Chinese. Also, many grammatical mistakes had been corrected. Then many linking devices which I failed to use had been added (DI.5).

This Project mark contributed to Dan’s achieving the 2.1 degree that she had dreamed of. Ironically, she was unaware of this until she received the certificate at the end of her course (DN.11). Had she adopted a growth mindset and hence a learning goal earlier, she might have achieved this result without the contribution of the proof-reader.

7.5.6 Continual struggles with language and integration

Dan seemed to have made limited improvement in her overall language skills due to her sporadic effort. Consequently, language continued to affect her studies and her integration into the learning community until the end of her course.

Her adoption of a surface approach to learning seems to have been the very cause of her low language attainment. She reported being confident in her reading skills, but she did not read “beyond what was required for the assignment” (DL.3; DL.4). Her limited effort to improve her listening skills meant that she continued to struggle with lecture comprehension. For example, whereas she reported understanding “70-80%” of Communication Theory in TB1 (DL.3), she reported understanding only about half of a lecture like Mass Communication in TB2 (DL.4; DL.5). Despite the inconsistency in her reports about her comprehension of the lectures, the fact that listening should still be an obstacle after three years’ study in the UK was worrying:
Even now I cannot fully understand all the lessons, due to both the language and the content. Language is responsible for 30% of the problem. There are times you simply cannot understand the content. For example, Mass Communication is very difficult (DL5).

Dan’s deepest disappointment, however, was with her speaking skills. The conflict between wanting to study with home students but feeling unable to integrate, between having to stay with Chinese students for convenience while benefitting little from them permeated her interviews:

It is a shame that studying here is not as what I had expected. I had thought we would be studying alongside home students. There would have been a huge improvement in my English, particularly in speaking. As I was surrounded by Chinese, I could not practise my oral English... We all feel that even though we do not know English very well, we can still survive here. Apart from going to classes, all the rest of the time, we contact only Chinese ... There is no choice... I prefer classes where there is a mixture of Chinese and non-Chinese students, like the Communication Theory class. Although we would sit according to nationality, the teacher would make sure Chinese and non-Chinese were in one group, so we could discuss something. If Chinese stay together, they will just chat in Chinese rather than discuss anything (DL4; DL5).

Dan’s remarks presented some facts about her learning environment, as was also discussed in the Context section. However, she clearly did not show the whole picture. There are indeed many opportunities to learn English in an English-speaking country. For example, activities are organised by the International Office, the Student Union of the University as well as individual departments to integrate international students, which Dan was aware of but did not seem to be interested in:

I know of the speaking activities, for example, Global Café, but I do not pay attention to these aspects. It’s not that I do not have the time. I just enjoy staying at home after class, and then shut myself in (DL3).

Wenger (1998, p.71) argues that “our experience and our world shape each other through a reciprocal relation that goes to the very essence of who we are”. He further contends that learning takes place through ‘community of practice’, where individuals learn through participation and negotiation for meanings. Dan did not appear to benefit much from her community of practice as an international student studying in the UK. As discussed before, her seeking professional help during her study was minimal; her discussions with peers of similar ability sometimes resulted in misleading information. Although she craved the opportunity to study alongside home students, this did not translate into action because of her ‘judgement goals’ (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, p.267), which she had formed at Level 4 but which continued to influence her at Level 6:
It’s not as easy as you imagined. Native speakers are very clever. They do not want you to make use of them only to practise English. This is reality. In group discussions in class, they are willing to discuss with you. But after class, they have their own circle, so why stay with you? I am the same (DI.4).

Indeed, a former teacher of Dan—a former teacher of Dan—who taught her two UK-student dominated units—confirmed that she did not interact with home students; instead, she would sit with the minority Chinese students of similar academic level, except when the teacher regrouped her with home students for group discussions (DN.19). Thus, Dan presented herself as an outsider of the community of practice. Due to the fixed mindset, she did not believe that she could nor, did she make any effort to integrate, which further contributed to her low attainment in language.

The conflict between her desire to integrate with home students on the one hand and to socialise only with her own nationals on the other suggests the impact of habitus on her. According to Bourdieu (2005), ‘habitus’ is close to ‘habit’ but also more inclusive. The habitus is structured by material conditions of existence and can related practices, beliefs, perceptions, feelings. Our habitus allows us to make certain choices over others, depending on our perceptions of our past and our present contexts. The choices made will in turn influence our future choices and take us on certain paths. With Dan, between the choices of her Chinese compatriots, who bear similar cultural thoughts and behaviour to her, and those of the home students, with whom she could barely find any topics in common, her habitus led her to opt for the familiar. This self-marginalising practice inevitably resulted in a deprivation of opportunities to improve her English.

That said, Dan did make some progress at Level 6. Her academic transcript (D.T) indicates that she obtained 60% for four units, including her Project for which she paid for proofreading. These helped her to secure a 2.1 degree, which Dan had not expected (DN.11). Indeed, how someone displaying a fixed mindset, studying mostly with performance goals, adopting a helpless surface approach to their learning, and demonstrating only sporadic self-regulation and motivation could achieve this overall grade seems to contradict implicit theories research. To solve this puzzle, we can look to other factors that might have contributed to this degree result. One such factor could be her adaptation to the UK higher education through years of ‘deliberate practice’ (Ericsson, 2008) in classroom instructions and completing assignments. However, Ericsson (2008) also emphasizes that it is active engagement in deliberate practice that distinguishes expert performances from non-expert performances. Whereas expert performers spend hours engaging in deliberate practice, following task-specific training provided by teachers and coaches, from whom individuals “gain immediate feedback, time for problem-solving and evaluation, and opportunities for repeated performance” (p.988), non-expert performers may stop at the level of automation. The latter could be Dan’s case. As discussed before, displaying a fixed mindset, she had never been consistently engaged in deep learning. Instead, she was steered by a goal.
of “not failing any units” (DI.4), which she achieved via observing the assessment rules, and learning to balance her marks between examinations and essay writing.

7.6 Summary and discussion

7.6.1 Summary

Dan’s three-year learning journey appears to have been fraught with academic difficulties that were accompanied by negative emotions and frustrations. Her academic motivation fluctuated as a result of her disillusionment with her goal pursuit at Level 4, her negotiation between a personal goal and a social goal at Level 5, and her consistent pursuit of a performance goal at Level 6. Underlying these behavioural changes was a constant display of a fixed mindset orientation, which led to maladaptive coping strategies and surface learning. Whereas she changed from problem-avoidance coping at Level 4 (7.3) to problem-approach coping at times at Level 5 (7.4), a performance-goal orientation remained unchanged at Level 6 (7.5). By securing high marks through strategic balancing of the essay marks with examination marks as a self-protection strategy also meant her losing the opportunities to improve her learning. Her low self-efficacy in both strategy use and self-regulation (7.3.2; 7.4.3) as a result of holding a fixed mindset led to her relapse into negative emotion coping when challenged at Level 6 (7.5.3). Table 7.2 below further summarizes her strategy use, which forms the basis for the discussion of the research questions.

Table 7.2: Dan’s three-year development from Level 4 to Level 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
<th>Level 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic difficulties</td>
<td>All 4 language skills, particularly in listening and writing Unfamiliarity with examinations</td>
<td>All language skills remained insufficient; essay writing skills were the most problematic</td>
<td>Language skills still problematic, particularly in listening to lectures; essay writing criteria remained unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>Fixed mindset</td>
<td>Fixed mindset</td>
<td>Fixed mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Amotivated</td>
<td>Social and performance goals</td>
<td>Performance and social goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping styles</td>
<td>Problem-avoidance</td>
<td>Problem-avoidance</td>
<td>Fluctuations between problem-focused and problem-avoidance coping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
<td>Negative emotional coping and procrastination</td>
<td>Negative emotional coping and procrastination</td>
<td>Effort and self-regulation, but also procrastination and wishful thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with others</td>
<td>Chinese peers of similar level; occasional help from Learning Support Tutor</td>
<td>Largely on her own, occasionally peer discussions</td>
<td>Largely on her own and occasionally discussions with Project tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to study</td>
<td>Surface learning</td>
<td>Strategic and surface</td>
<td>Overall surface, although some signs of deep learning in the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic self-efficacy</td>
<td>Very weak in almost all academic skills</td>
<td>Low except in examinations</td>
<td>Low in general but slight improvement in writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of failure</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievements</td>
<td>Mostly between 40%-50%</td>
<td>Mostly around 50%</td>
<td>Mostly just over 60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with learning</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Low to moderate</td>
<td>Varied according to the unit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.6.2 Discussion

Table 7.2 indicates that Dan experienced difficulties in both language, writing and integration. Despite her slow progress over three years, a fixed mindset remained virtually the same. This led to weak academic self-efficacy and considerable fear of failure. Her overall problem-avoidance coping strategies and surface learning inevitably resulted in her sense of disintegration and dissatisfaction. In the following, the research questions will be answered with a focus on exploring the relationship between Dan’s mindset, her self-efficacy, her coping strategies and the learning outcomes.

Q1. What academic difficulties did she experience and how did she cope with them?

Low language competence and lack of familiarity with the UK higher education conventions have been reported as the chief sources of academic challenges for Chinese students (Gu & Maley, 2008; Su, 2010). Dan’s learning experience supports this. Some consistent themes running through her learning journey include the essay writing and integrating with the learning community, all relating to her difficulties with the English language.

It seems that largely due to a fixed mindset, she did not believe that she could improve her academic performance through effort and strategy change. Consequently, although she made intermittent effort in her studies, she was constantly experiencing helplessness, which can lead to avoidance-coping (Skinner et al., 2003). Certainly, Dan often utilised avoidance coping when difficulties arose. Moreover, her preoccupation with emotion-focused coping resulted in the fact that she did not develop her learning skills to address these issues.
Help seeking, or students obtaining help from teachers and peers in times of difficulties can be adaptive or less adaptive (Linnenbrink, 2006). Expedient help seeking, for example, focuses on obtaining answers to complete the task in hand and avoiding making an effort (Ryan & Shim, 2012, p.1124). Dan’s help seeking in most cases was out of expediency. Just as argued in the existing literature, although expediency help seeking may help students achieve high marks in the short term, their academic performance suffers in the long term because seeking immediate answers does not allow learning to take place (Ryan & Shim, 2012). Dan’s underlying academic challenges persisted probably due to her seeking only expediency help.

Consistent with her display of a fixed mindset, she seemed to be adopting what Dweck and Leggett (1988) call ‘judgement goals’, or the tendency to measure and evaluate an external attribute based on limited evidence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). These goals are likely to have led her to avoid integrating with home students, engaging in class discussions or seeking professional help when in difficulty. Self-selecting to become an outsider of the learning community, Dan deprived herself of the many learning opportunities.

Q2. What changes did she experience and why?

Demonstrating an overall fixed mindset, Dan pursued a performance goal throughout her three-year study, which means few fundamental changes took place. The development of her conceptions of learning and her coping strategies are evidence of this conclusion.

As argued by the mindset theory, students holding a fixed mindset are expected to adopt problem-focused coping when their academic self-efficacy is strong, and problem-avoidance coping when their self-efficacy is low (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Dan’s fixed mindset led to her disbelief in effort and self-regulation, resulting in few changes in her coping strategies.

Evidence from the literature (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004) suggests that students’ learning patterns are related to their different views of knowledge: A more absolutistic view of knowledge or a more relativistic view of knowledge. Those holding an absolutistic view prefer both ‘a reproduction-directed learning pattern’, featuring direct intake of knowledge, stepwise processing (i.e., analysing and memorising), external regulation, and certificate/degree focused, and ‘an undirected learning pattern’, exhibited by the absence of self-regulation, and experience of lack of support from the environment. In contrast, students with a more relativistic view of knowledge prefer meaning-directed learning, including deep processing, self-regulation, construction of knowledge, and interest in learning.

Clearly, a reproduction learning pattern, which is evident from Level 4 (7.3.2; 7.3.3) to Level 6 (7.5.1), is characteristic of Dan’s approaches to learning. It was only when approaching the end of her course that some signs of deep learning emerged, as she started to be self-regulated, focus more on teacher
feedback and also spend more time on her essay structure. However, as argued previously (7.5.5), these signs of deep learning were too few and came too late to address all her academic issues. Given a predominant surface learning approach, Dan would only be expected to switch back to a vicious cycle of low self-efficacy—low investment in effort and strategies seeking—low performance—low self-efficacy (7.5.3).

Q3. How did Chinese culture influence her academic coping?

Chinese students carry with them certain beliefs about certain ways of learning that they have formed through socialisation and these beliefs may continue to affect their subsequent academic studies in the UK (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). This is possibly the case for students from all cultures, but pertinent to Dan’s case and related to her specific culture of origin are social goals and mindset.

The literature (Fuligni, 2001) would argue that because of the value they attach to their social goals, Chinese students tend to value effort and to persevere in the pursuit of their goals. Dan’s social goals impacted the learning process. The incompatibility of her social goals and the course structure resulted in her amotivation at Level 4. After she had internalised her social goal at Level 5, one would have expected her to pursue the goal through effort. However, Dan’s behaviour demonstrated otherwise. Although she seemed to hold some belief in effort initially, she dismissed such belief very quickly with her perception of failure to achieve high marks despite a little effort (DI.3). Due to the fact that she held more of a fixed mindset, Dan would, instead of focusing on improving herself via better learning strategies, adopt self-protection strategies to obtain high marks (7.4.3).

Dan’s pursuit of performance goals with little effort and self-regulation may reflect a changing Chinese society, where there is a tendency for the Chinese middle class to treat education as an end product that can be purchased and consumed (Rosen, 2004). Therefore, what is valued could be the degree qualification rather than the learning process and learning itself. This may, and does in Dan’s case, have a detrimental effect on students in that deep learning may never take place.
Chapter 8 Wei’s resilience

8.1 Introduction

I came to know Wei in January 2013, when he was at Level 5, his second year at the UK University. He caught my attention from my very first observation of his GL5 class. His active participation in class distinguished him from the majority of his classmates, who were usually silent (WO.1-3). The trust developed during the research allowed me to obtain rich data to explore his undergraduate learning journey—one of eventual academic success but also fraught with challenges.

Wei’s story exemplifies how a growth mindset can help international students to thrive in a supporting learning environment despite the initial ‘learning shock’ (Gu, 2009) during their cross-cultural education, and more importantly, to achieve academic resilience, which is defined as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding” (Morales, 2008, p. 152). Data collected from formal interviews, class observations and notes from informal talks, online messages, an interview with the LST, and his three-year academic transcripts (W.T) from the University after he graduated in 2015 helped formulated the answers to the following research questions:

Q1. What academic difficulties did he experience and how did he cope with them?

Q2. What changes did he make and why?

Q3. How did Chinese culture influence his academic coping and learning?

This narrative analysis follows a chronological order to recount Wei’s learning development over the three distinctive periods using ‘thick description’: Initial academic struggles, recovery, and academic resilience and personal growth from Level 4 to Level 6. The following first-person narrative provides the backdrop for understanding Wei’s situation.

8.2 Wei’s background

I was a good student in junior high school. Starting from senior high, I shifted all my attention to playing computer games and basketball. Teachers would talk to me sarcastically, and scolded me for messing around the class’ rank in the school measured by examinations. Teachers and students are like enemies in China. The low achievers are all bad students in their eyes. That’s why I always have some reservations about teachers (WN.4).

I got a very low gaokao score in 2010 and could not enter a good Chinese university. Then my parents paid for me to study International Trade and Business Communication (ITBC) at a Chinese university,
which cooperated with this UK University (WI.1). The Chinese university was irresponsible towards us because we were different from the formally registered students. We paid the money and the University promised to obtain a UK student visa for us. The teachers were part-time and they just introduced us to theoretical knowledge about business and trade (WI.1; WN.4). I spent all the time playing computer games, basketball or doing shopping, so I learned nothing.

My parents decided that I should come to the UK to learn some practical knowledge and culture the second year (WI.1). That was a joint decision. My family is very democratic. My parents were both college-educated and work for the government (WI.1; WI.2). I had little idea how difficult it would be. I was told by the Agency that ITBC was the easiest course, so I chose it. I had not hoped to do a Master’s course (WI.4).

I took IELTS just once in 2011 and obtained an overall score of 4.5. The score was barely enough for the PSE course at a UK language school from July to September 2011. I was very distressed because English was my biggest problem but I had to write English essays. It was really hard (WI.1). I could not follow the class—English sounded so different from what I had learned before (WI.3). I could not read English well, let alone speak it (WI.3). I did not dare to speak English because I worried about being laughed at (WN.1).

I enjoyed my Chinese friends’ company but some obtained IELTS scores at 6, so they did not want to do group work with me because of my poor English. I sensed their scoffs. In one group presentation, I could only manage to read the script from a piece of paper. Then, a non-Chinese student asked me sarcastically during the question time: “How many words are there on that piece of paper?” I felt so sad (WN.4). I could not understand native speakers when I went shopping. They would look at me and shrug their shoulders. I felt terrible (WI.3).

There were many tests for the PSE course, and I never passed one in the first month. I was so worried. But there was no retreat. I had to work my socks off. At last I passed the PSE Course. Still, I had lots of worries. The PSE Course was language-based but the University course also involved subject knowledge (WN.4).

Wei’s worries about his future university life were not unfounded. Although he had managed to pass the language threshold required for his course study through the 12-week PSE course, the level of his language improvement might still be insufficient. Furthermore, his negative associations of the teacher-student relationship might also affect his adaptation to a Western university including the UK, where teaching and learning emphasizes the interactions between teachers and students to construct knowledge in the learning process (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2008).
The positive signs are that Wei seems to have embraced more of a growth mindset of improving himself through effort despite all difficulties due to his low language competence. Equally importantly, he also seems to have internalised his social goals, of living up to his parents’ expectations that he should learn something useful. This identification of his social goals might also have motivated him academically because the notion of children showing obedience to their parents is still a cultural virtue in Chinese society (Salili & Lai, 2003).

In September 2011, Wei started his course. The components of ITBC have been explained in Ting’s case study (6.2). At Level 5 and Level 6, Wei took the same core units as Ting, but different optional units (Table 8.1).

Table 8.1: Wei’s 3-year course components, 2011-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
<th>Level 6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core</td>
<td>• GL4</td>
<td>• GL5</td>
<td>• GL 6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• BC1</td>
<td>• BC 2</td>
<td>• BC 3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Introduction to International Business and Trade</td>
<td>• Corporate Analysis and Strategies in an International Context</td>
<td>• Final-year Project</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Studying at University</td>
<td>• Marketing and Communication</td>
<td>• International Marketing and Export Trade</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Developing Research Skills</td>
<td>• British Culture</td>
<td>• International Trade: Payment and Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional</td>
<td>• British Society and Institutions</td>
<td>• Business and Markets in a Global Environment (FHEQ5)</td>
<td>• Understanding Britain Today</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I now trace his learning journey guided by the research questions:

Q1. What academic difficulties did he experience and how did he try to cope with them?

Q2. What changes did he experience in his coping strategies and why?

Q3. How did Chinese culture influence his academic coping?

8.3 Level 4—a period of struggle

Level 4, Wei’s first year at the University witnessed his struggles for academic survival due to his inadequate language skills and lack of knowledge in his subject area. Striving hard but achieving only pass marks, he lost his academic self-efficacy in TB1.
However, TB2 proved a turning point, thanks to the timely intervention of a Learning Support Tutor (LST), whom I will subsequently nickname ‘Mick’. With improvement in learning strategies, Wei began to build his academic self-efficacy and improved his academic performance.

I will now use narrative analysis (4.9) to construct Wei’s Level 4 story, based on Wei’s retrospection for elongation purpose (4.5). I will also triangulate his self-reports (interviews and informal talks) via his academic transcripts (W.T) and an interview with ‘Mick’.

8.3.1 TB1—a depressing period

Interviewed one year later, Wei could still vividly recall what he had been through in TB1. He seemed to have experienced every imaginable difficulty, ranging from day-to-day study to assessments:

_I could hardly understand what the teachers were talking about in class. I couldn’t even read English well, even though sometimes I made efforts to preview a lesson. Classmates would look at me in a strange way, and they didn’t want to do group work with me (WL.3; WN.4)._

According to Bandura (1993), social comparisons can affect one’s self-efficacy by either lowering it or improving it. Social comparisons with more able peers can undermine students’ self-efficacy, if they find their own performance is inferior to those of their peers (Schunk & Pajares, 2001, p.7). These negative social comparisons were likely to have lowered Wei’s judgement of his capabilities to improve his language, leading to his skipping classes, a sign of avoidance-coping:

_I skipped many classes as a freshman. I felt terrible when I couldn’t understand…. I would stay at home watching Chinese movies. I did not tell my parents or anybody about my low feelings. I bore all consequences myself. I felt so sad (WL 3)._

Wei’s sadness conveys not only a sense of helplessness but also loneliness. Coming from a culture where an individual student’s academic success bears consequences for the family honour (Liu, 2013), Wei must have felt too ashamed of his own poor academic performances to discuss his problems with his compatriots or parents. Additionally, he was yet to overcome ‘cultural loneliness’, which is “triggered by the absence of the preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment” (Sawir, et al., 2008, p.171)). Cultural loneliness is found to intensify the loneliness that often occurs with sudden absence of support from family and familiar social networks (Sawir, et al., 2008). Both low self-efficacy and cultural loneliness could have led to his negative emotions.

Wei also reported encountering considerable difficulty writing English essays. Although there were EAP classes from which he learned some English writing structures, he admitted that he “was too busy dealing with other units to give due attention to this unit” (WN.1). To complete the essay assignment,
he would “patch up an essay from here and there online” (WI.4) using “the little knowledge gained from EAP class” (WN.1) in combination with his knowledge in writing Chinese essays. After he repeatedly received “very low marks around 40-50%” when thinking he had done well, he “lost confidence” (I.4).

According to the literature, low academic self-efficacy increases both fear of failure and perception of a difficult situation as threatening, which, when combined with avoidant coping styles, may also increase academic anxiety (Ptuwain, Woods, & Symes, 2010). This fits the description of the vicious cycle that Wei found himself in: perceptions of an insurmountable language barrier, unfamiliarity with the academic conventions and lack of peer support contributed to his helplessness. The low essay marks from such inefficient strategies further lowered academic self-efficacy and induced fear of failure. The situation persisted until after Christmas, when he was forced to take some action for the assessments:

After Christmas, there were assessments and exams. I was told if I failed 60% of my course as a freshman, I would not even have the opportunity to re-sit. I was very much scared….because I really did not know anything. If I had to repeat, another year would be wasted, and money would be wasted. What would I say to my parents? All sorts of emotions became so overwhelming to me. I felt I was almost verging on committing suicide. There were only around ten days left, and it was not enough to learn so many subjects. Still, I exerted myself to read and memorise. There was no other way out (WI.3).

Wei’s thoughts about committing suicide might have been momentary; still, his behaviour reflects the reality in Chinese society. Reports on Chinese students taking this drastic measure are not unknown, when they feel they can no longer cope with their academic pressure or have failed academically and thus are unable to fulfil their social goals.

In Wei’s case, however, he decided to exert himself to live up to his parents’ expectations after his emotional struggles. His effort paid off. He failed only one examination for one unit, but passed its overall assessment. Explaining the reason for his failure in the examination, Wei said he “just memorised the test bank and PPT slides” because he thought that “the UK examination would be similar to Chinese examinations”, only to find that “in the examinations they did not appear at all” (WN.1).

Wei’s experience is not unlike that of Dan and Zihao. Influenced by his previous Chinese university education, where he passed the examinations through rote learning, Wei applied the same strategy to his UK examinations and failed. Wei drew a lesson from this, saying that “rote learning was useless” and thereafter, he would “listen to the teacher, take notes and read books to understand the subjects” to prepare for his future examinations (WN.1).
The differences between UK and Chinese assessments enabled the first transition from learning from mechanical memorisation to learning from understanding for Wei. The results of the assessment also enabled Wei to establish the connections between making effort and surviving at the UK University. As will be mentioned later, the affirmation of effort in learning coincided with his belief system and therefore, was vital for his later transformation. Knowing that he could use effort to improve himself helped him to gain some academic self-efficacy.

According to Bandura (1993), students’ academic self-efficacy can be enhanced by social comparison if they feel they have done better than their peers and that self-efficacy gained in one area can subsequently generalise to other areas. The fact that some of his friends who were better than himself “failed some units because they did not go over their lessons” (WI.3) increased Wei’s self-efficacy in employing this strategy. He may have subsequently generalised this newly acquired self-efficacy to other areas of study. Accordingly, passing the assessments in TB1, Level 4 and acquiring some ‘minimal academic self-efficacy’ were crucial for Wei’s changes in TB2.

8.3.2 TB2—A transitional period

TB2 of Wei’s first year marked the transition for him. Supported by ‘‘Mick’’, the University Learning Support Tutor (LST), Wei started to make steady progress. He learned to invest in organised effort in improving his language and essay writing, which further enhanced his academic self-efficacy.

8.3.2.1 Seeking support from the LST

Recalling his transition, Wei told me on several occasions that he was “really grateful” to ‘Mick’ for his support (WI.3; WN.4). Nonetheless, Wei admitted that he was very reluctant to make use of this service until he was worried about the consequences of failing the assessments. I will first provide a retrospective review of the situation in 2011 based on an interview with ‘Mick’ (WN.14).

In 2011, the School, which Wei belonged to, started the LST service to help students to improve academic and/or English language skills. Seeing very few students were utilising this new service, the two LSTs appointed to this position (‘Mick’ and one other) took the initiative to send an email to every new student encouraging them to seek help from them at the beginning of TB1. Then before Christmas, they sent another email to those weak students who had been referred to this service by their language tutors (WN.14).

Ignoring the first email, Wei was worried about the second one and was forced to take action: “‘Mick’ said if I did not go, he would contact my tutor. It was Joe (Wei’s personal tutor teaching BC unit) at that time. He was very strict, and I was a bit scared of him. So reluctantly I went to see ‘Mick’” (WI.3).
Wei admitted that he did not like this first meeting: “I did not understand the language, so I did not like the conversation very much” (WI.3).

The meeting might have appeared perfunctory on Wei’s part; however, the atmosphere established from the conversation might have been conducive to his seeking help from ‘Mick’ in TB2, Level 4, when he felt he had to turn to ‘Mick’ for help: “In TB2, I did not want to torment myself that much and to carry a huge burden with me. I was scared of repeats, so I went to see ‘Mick’” (WI.1; WI.3). This second visit was the beginning for his subsequent bi-weekly visits to ‘Mick’ in TB2 (WI.3; WI.4). Obtaining the LST’s support proved catalytic to Wei’s subsequent changes, as evidenced by ‘Mick’ s remarks (WN.14):

It is our goal to help students to become independent learners because the whole point of the University is to turn them into independent learners…. We give them the directions…. When they come to me, I will have a look at their coursework, I will look for something systematic, and then I will say: This is what you do. See whether you can change the rest of the essay based on what I have said. Then come back to me next week. I have a principle: I will improve their work no more than 20%; otherwise, it’s not their work (WN.14).

The benefits that Wei gained from such regular visits were threefold: improving learning strategies, facilitating autonomous learning and increasing self-efficacy. ‘Mick’ s principle of “giving the direction”, showing students “the more effective ways of learning” but asking them to do the work (WN.14) helped to foster learner autonomy, which could be vital to international students’ adaptation. This appears particularly so with students similar to Wei, who, after having received teacher-centred education many years in China, need time to adapt to UK HE. Wei was grateful to ‘Mick’ for his directions, saying that “although those were basic knowledge, they were very useful for me with a low English level” (WI.4).

Most importantly, Wei’s academic self-efficacy was further increased as he learned more effective strategies. Knowing that there was someone there ready to help him could also explain Wei’s reported “gaining more confidence” after each visit (WI.4). Self-efficacy can increase both the quantity and quality of effort that students make towards their learning, including more task engagement, and more adoption of deep learning and performance-approach goals (Liem et al., 2008). With increased self-efficacy, Wei started to tackle academic problems through more organised effort in TB2.

8.3.2.2 Tackling language and essay problems

Wei began to improve his language in all areas by fitting ‘Mick’ s suggestions into his own style. A year later, Wei recalled the difficult but also rewarding learning process at Level 4 with relief:
There were some interesting stories about my language learning. At first, I could hardly understand the vocabulary. I was so angry that I cursed. I had to consult the dictionary all the time. How could that be interesting? Anyway, I tried to consult some words through a Chinese online dictionary and accumulate vocabulary slowly. I learned 20-30 words every day…. For listening, I recorded BBC programmes and listened to them every day…. By the end of Level 4, I had learned about 3000 words…. For reading, I read BBC for half an hour every day. For speaking, I got help from ‘Mick’ about pronunciation (WI.1; WI.3).

Wei’s perseverance was rewarded and the quantity of his self-reported vocabulary acquisition appears impressive indeed. However, more scrutiny is needed regarding the quality. As Wei later confirmed, his vocabulary strategy at this stage was to check individual word meanings through a bilingual dictionary, and then to remember them by rote learning and repetition (WN.1), which has been found to be most prevalent among Chinese students trying to pass the high-stake English examinations in China (Ren, 2011). Rote learning without context means that Wei had yet to develop his metacognitive ability and needed to adjust his vocabulary learning strategies to retain a useful stock of vocabulary to reach ‘vocabulary mastery, Language learners have to undergo developmental stages to reach this vocabulary mastery stage, which means that their knowledge of a word should include its different meanings, and its collocational use and its spelling (Tseng & Schmitt, 2008).

To Wei, writing an English essay was the most challenging. Nevertheless, feeling supported, he did not retreat but was determined to tackle it this time:

Writing was the biggest problem. The biggest challenge was how I could overcome my Chinese English… I showed ‘Mick’ some of my writing. He would not make comments on them, but would point out problems, particularly grammar. It’s very useful. Also, ‘Mick’ recommended me a very useful book called “Academic writing: A handbook for International Students” (Bailey, 2006) (WI.1).

Wei obviously benefitted very much from ‘Mick’s instructions and feedback. As suggested by the literature, constructive feedback which offers students’ specific advice on how to improve will encourage students to make effort to improve their writing (Weaver, 2006). Just as self-efficacy and motivation can be enhanced via strategy training (Schunk, 2003), the timely intervention from the LST and Wei’s willingness to seek it from an early start improved Wei’s academic skills.

8.3.2.3 Motivated by the teachers

Greater academic self-efficacy can strengthen students’ belief in their own ability to be in charge of their academic issues, which may motivate them to develop more study skills and improve their academic performance (Putwain, Sander, & Larkin, 2013). With improved academic self-efficacy and
efficient study skills, Wei reported more academic engagement, as demonstrated in his self-reported active class participation and help-seeking from teachers:

In TB2 of Level 4, many students did not listen to the teachers in class. But I did, and teachers liked me…. Then there was an essay assignment. I couldn’t understand the instructions in English, so I went to see the unit teacher. She was very warm and she did not comment on how bad my English was. Gradually, I found teachers did not look at me in a peculiar way. I did not care what they thought about me but at least when face to face, they made me feel comfortable. When my English got better, I had less and less fear about talking with them (WI.3).

Bandura (1977) emphasizes, avoidance behaviour caused by emotional arousal can be reduced when self-efficacy is enhanced. Clearly, the teachers’ encouragement motivated Wei to overcome his initial reservations about teachers and his self-efficacy seems to be increasing thanks to the positive social comparison in TB2. Consequently, Wei reported positive changes:

The more I learned, the more enthusiastic I became. Gradually, I surpassed those with IELTS scores of 5 and 5.5. Perhaps this is related to vanity. The better I became, the better I wanted to become” (WI.4).

This can be described as ‘resultative motivation’, which relates to learners who are motivated to learn more as a result of their attitudinal change towards the target language and their successful learning experience (Hermann, 1980). In clear contrast to TB1, when he felt lonely and isolated, Wei now turned from being almost an outsider in his language class to being an active participant. Wenger describes ‘communities of practice’ as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (2011, p.1). As he learned to discuss his problems with the teachers and participate in classroom discussions, he gradually negotiated his way into the centre of communities of practice. More importantly, the sense of relatedness and belonging helped him develop intrinsic motivation in learning.

Feeling supported and related, Wei became increasingly self-regulated. Self-regulation, defined as “self-generated thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that are oriented to attaining goals” (Zimmerman, 2002, p.65) affects students’ academic motivation and academic success. Wei’s self-regulation in structuring both time and place enabled to make steady academic progress:

I kept a schedule in my notebook. I made a new to-do list every day. Then I checked to make sure that I had completed each task. If I did not finish all the tasks, I felt bad (WI.1).

Wei’s academic report (W.T) indicates that he achieved between 50-60% for all the units (WI.3; W.T), which meant that he was on track for a 2.2 degree by the end of Level 4, although, in fact, the first-year
scores do not count in the final degree classification. Wei’s change from being a potential dropout to an self-regulated learner can be explained by Self-determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which argues that when the three basic needs—competence, relatedness and autonomy are met, students are more likely to become intrinsically motivated and to be more self-regulated in their studies (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Motivated by both his social goals, his improved self-efficacy and support from the LST and teachers, Wei proceeded to Level 5.

8.4 Level 5— a period of recovery

Wei continued to make steady progress at Level 5. With his academic self-efficacy further improved, he set about attaining a higher goal of pursuing a master’s degree from a UK university (W1.3). A snapshot of his GL5 class evidences his motivation of this period.

8.4.1 A snapshot of Wei’s GL5 class observation (21/01/2013)

Amidst the excitement of the first winter snow in this UK city in several years, I came to Wei’s GL5 class on a Monday morning in January 2013 for the second observation. This is a seminar room with a horseshoe desk layout. The teacher has arrived, waiting for more students to come. Wei is sitting in the middle of the row facing the teacher. I sit near a corner on the wing side, among some students.

By 10 o’clock, 12 Chinese students have turned up. The teacher greets the class and talks with them about the disruption caused by the sleet, which she explains as ‘a mixture of rain and snow’. She asks the students about how they spent their weekend. Wei volunteers: “Something interesting happened to me during the weekend. In the sleet, I volunteered to share my umbrella with a European boy. He was also going to the library. Then I found people looking at me as if we were homosexuals”. The teacher smiled, saying “You mean ‘gay’”? “Yes”, Wei responds, looking interested.

Today’s subject is descriptive writing using metaphors and similes. In the workbook are excerpts of Harry Potter. As a warm-up activity, the teacher asks students whether they would like to read the novels or watch movies on Happy Porter. After obtaining answers from a couple of volunteers, the teacher asks the class to work in groups to find out the metaphorical expressions about Dumbledore.

Very soon the class fall quiet as students seem to be busy checking new vocabulary on their mobile phones while reading. The male student sitting next to me keeps checking an online English-Chinese dictionary for the Chinese meanings. “The trouble is, there are so many new words that I do not know”, he whispers to me in Chinese.
The teacher now explains some expressions such as ‘buckled boots’, ‘tuck in his belt’, ‘crooked nose’, ‘crane’, using both body language and google images. She associates the word ‘crane’ with some recent BBC news that a helicopter hit the top of a crane (a lifting machine) and crashed. The majority of the class are now listening to the teacher. However, a girl sitting next to me has been browsing shopping pages online and texting messages to her friends. Accidentally the notification sound of her phone startles the class. “Oh, that’s loud,” the teacher remarks. “Sorry,” she says and silences her phone but only shifts her eyes to the book for a short while.

After the first hour, some students seem to be getting tired, yawning. The class becomes even quieter. After explaining metaphors and similes with examples, the teacher asks students to look for the metaphoric expressions about Harry Potter in groups. Again, students are reading it individually. Several students around me are clearly texting messages in Chinese on their mobile phones.

Similar to the previous activity, the teacher emphasizes expressions, for example, ‘lanky’, and ‘knobbly knees’ by using body language and google images. She also adds some cultural knowledge telling the class that there is a UK traditional Knobbly Knee Competition. Most of the class are silent, perhaps due to the amount of vocabulary. Only a couple of students including Wei and the only HK male student have been interacting with the teacher. Wei listens with interest, smiling and interacting with the teacher at times.

The class now move on to describe the key features of a company in groups for others to guess. At last this activity seems to motivate some students who immediately start to work on it by checking on their mobile phones. 15 minutes have passed and most students seem to be ready. Wei volunteers to present his group’s writing through the visualizer. His English is not very grammatical, but clear enough for others to guess Wei’s description of the company involved Jaguar, the English car company. Wei returns to his seat, appearing satisfied with his delivery (WO.2).

My two other GL5 class observations suggested a very similar picture: The teacher was infusing the lessons with interesting cultural anecdotes (WO.1, WO.3). Wei obviously enjoyed his GL5 class, describing the teacher as “not rigid but fun, always combining cultural stories in her lessons” (WN.1). Although the vocabulary he acquired might not always be related to his academic studies, he was learning it, possibly to help him become more acquainted with English culture. This integrative motivation, which is similar to intrinsic motivation because of its positive attitude towards the target language and the culture, motivated him to learn for enjoyment and pleasure (Noels, 2001). It was likely that a similar motivation enabled Wei to stay focused, volunteer to answer the questions and interact with the teacher actively despite the apparent lack of interest from the rest of the class, who were either
silent or browsing on their mobile phones for purposes other than consulting the dictionary most of the time (WO.1-WO.3).

Wei impressed me with his apparent self-regulation during my class observations. Undisturbed by the behaviour of his peers, he was making use of every opportunity to improve, which is also a sign of a learning goal. This goal also motivated him to seek improvement after class.

8.4.2 Persistence in language learning

Wei reported encountering considerable difficulties in reading due to insufficient specialist vocabulary (WI.1). Research (Schmitt, Jiang, & Grabe, 2011) suggests that the more vocabulary one has, the better the reading comprehension is. More specifically, 95-99% of vocabulary coverage is needed in order to achieve adequate understanding, which amounts to 8,000 to 9,000 words. However, despite his self-account of a large vocabulary increase at Level 4 (8.3.2.2), the quality of his mechanical memorisation without context may have contributed little to his reading comprehension. Frustrated initially, Wei soon learned to resolve the problem with effort:

Many times, I just wanted to throw out the books out of frustration, and then I would pick them up again after a day or two. I realized there was only one way out—memorising the new words (WI.3). It’s terrible to start memorising them again. It’s indeed very difficult, very boring to consult the dictionary, to take notes and then to memorise many times…. But I had no other way (WI.3).

More importantly, at Level 5, Wei was also able to reflect on his learning process, and he learned to adjust his rote learning by combining memorisation with contextual information:

If I just remember the words from the dictionary, I would soon forget them. So, soon I learned words from materials I read. I will think: Ah, I have come across this word in this or that place (WI.1).

With more effective strategies, Wei increased his vocabulary and he felt “it’s easier to read books” at TB2 (WI.1; WI.3). As his language improved, Wei started to focus on writing a higher level of essay, namely, the development of the content and the structure.

8.4.3 Tackling essay problems

Wei reported improving his essays by extensive reading and repeated drafting at Level 5. A noticeable change was his efforts to create further learning opportunities based on the teacher feedback, which is a clear sign of a learning goal pursuit.
Wei’s discussions with ‘Mick’ seemed to be more language- than discourse-related by this stage (WI.4). As his course progressed, Wei reported struggling to overcome the Chinese writing conventions in order to structure his English essays differently: “English people write with supports, but the biggest mistake of the Chinese is to write: ‘in my opinion’. At first, I was angry with myself. I really found it hard” (WL3).

The difficulty that Wei experienced may also mirror the challenges other Chinese international students may also encounter when writing English essays. One possible reason could be that not all of them have received proper essay writing instructions from highly qualified teachers in China (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). The other could be, as in Wei’s case, that Chinese students may have been conditioned to write an argumentative essay using expressions such as ‘I think’, ‘in my opinion’ and ‘as far as I am concerned’, from their experiences of writing English essays based on the requirements of Chinese CET 4 and CET 6 (2.2.4). Moreover, Chinese research articles tend to use first-person plurals rather than third-person pronouns to indicate impersonality (Wu & Zhu, 2015). Accordingly, Chinese students may transfer these cultural practices to their English essays. This may clash with English writing conventions; in general require impersonality in argumentation and the avoidance of first-person pronouns to help achieve objectivity (Hyland, 2001). However, the use of first person pronouns varies across different disciplines and that, by forbidding the use of them, students from the soft disciplines may risk “failing to create a successful academic argument” (Hyland, 2002, p. 354).

Despite the challenges, Wei reported choosing units with essays as assessments at Level 5 to achieve better academic outcomes and prepare for his future studies:

*Writing is something I just cannot avoid forever. I will have to write my graduation paper eventually. Also, there is such a long time for me to prepare the essays. I can put all my ideas in the writing and I could ensure all my effort would pay off. By contrast, some elements, like nervousness, might affect my performance in the exam. This would undermine the huge effort I have invested in the preparation (WL3).*

Wei’s remarks suggest that he was still much influenced by ‘performance goals for emotion regulation’ instead of ‘learning goals for emotion regulation’. The former are defined as “seeking to prove or demonstrate one’s ability to manage emotions” and the latter, “seeking to improve or develop one’s ability to manage emotions” (Rusk, Tamir, & Rothbaum, 2011, p.445). The performance goals may lead to defensive strategies, for example, withdrawal of effort, while the learning goals can contribute to constructive strategies, for example, increasing effort and seeking help. The strategic choice of essay over examination allowed Wei to offset the negative consequences associated with performance goals.
in examinations and to focus on essay writing, which he coped with strategies such as time management and effort.

Wei’s reliance on only time management and effort suggests that a growth mindset still at a rudimentary stage. A full growth mindset featuring the combined use of effort and strategies (Dweck, 2015) did not appear until a critical incident at Level 5:

*One unit was very difficult. I spent a very long time preparing for it and wrote many points, but I got only 60. I was shocked at the mark, as I had expected to get at least 65% because I had invested so much effort…. So, I went to talk with the unit tutor. He gave me lots of suggestions. I spent less time on the second essay but obtained 68% (WN.13).*

Wei’s dissatisfaction with 60%, in contrast to his goal of passing all the assessment at Level 4 suggests that he had raised his ‘minimal goal level’, defined as “the lowest goal in a continuum of potential reinforcements which will be perceived as satisfaction” (Battle, 1965). In line with the literature (Zimmerman et al., 1992), ‘minimal goal level’ can be affected by students’ self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, in turn, can be influenced by students’ mindset. Wei’s perception of improvement through effort in comparison with his peers further increased his self-efficacy, which motivated him to pursue a higher goal, and the higher goal pursuit in turn motivated him to evaluate his learning and explore more adaptive coping strategies, leading to achieve better learning outcomes. Wei’s subsequent continuous effort in making use of tutorial time to discuss with the professionals supported this:

*From then on, I have always talked to the teachers based on their feedback. It’s good. After all, it’s not your final writing; what you gather you will apply to your future writing (WN.13).*

According to Norton (1990), there is a mismatch between what the students and their tutors thought as the most important essay criteria. For example, whereas tutors rated “understanding and answering essay questions and reasonable argument” as essential, the students thought providing “content, information and then understanding and evidence of wide reading” in addition to answering essay questions as most important (Norton, 1990, p.432). Norton (1990) attributed this to the small number of students (5%) that never discussed their essays with their tutors. Wei was one of those students who learned to narrow down the gaps between his knowledge of an essay and that of his teachers. Knowing “what teachers focus on” in order to “pay attention to it” (WL.3), Wei improved his essay marks based on teachers’ feedback.

The fact that Wei was able to improve based on feedback also suggests a growth mindset. As people with a growth mindset are less likely to perceive learning-relevant feedback as threats, they spend more effort on solving the problems and becoming more resilient after failure (Mangels et.al, 2006).
building on teacher feedback, Wei enhanced understanding through reading, a process that indicates deep learning. In line with the motivation literature that suggests self-efficacy beliefs influence academic goals, which in turn affect academic outcomes (Zimmerman et al., 1992), a discernible virtuous cycle was emerging in Wei:

*At Level 5, I began to read many books for references, which was very important. I had to consult the dictionary and recite the words in the books. I could understand about half of the contents at first. Eventually, through reading, noting the new words and remembering them, I was able to understand most of the books (WI.3).*

Equally importantly, Wei’s further improvement in self-efficacy via essay writing would lead him to seek more opportunities to improve his English. Whereas previously he had seemed to confine learning opportunities to language classes and self-studies, now he would seek interactions with native speakers.

### 8.4.4 Seeking alternative ways to improve his English

As intrinsic motivation leads to mindfulness of one’s own performances (Ryan & Deci, 2008), Wei became increasingly reflective of his academic needs as he became more autonomous and was more proactive in solving his own problems. Realising that his spoken English and grammar were weak due to the limited opportunities to speak English outside class at Level 5 (WN.1), he decided to utilize “the last opportunity to learn English” by living with a host family (WI.1).

Dornyei ((2009) argues that ‘the ideal L2 self’, what one wishes to become; ‘the ought-to L2’ self, what one should become based on one’s obligations and responsibilities, together with the L2 learning environment, affect students’ language learning motivation. Wei’s effort to integrate into the host culture also suggests that his self-concept had evolved over the previous two years. Whereas the initial significant gap between the actual self (speaking poor English) and the ideal self (speaking like a native speaker) gave rise to the predomination of the feared-self, his subsequent progress, gradually reduced the discrepancy, so that he shifted from avoidance to approach coping, in seeking help from native speakers.

Wei failed to find a suitable homestay after looking for three months (WN.1). This, however, did not deter him from accomplishing his goal of “getting high marks for MA and speak English like a native speaker” (WI.2). He reported keeping close contact on Facebook with some “very friendly” British trainee teachers, who did practice teaching in his class at Level 5. He asked them to improve his grammar and expressions occasionally (WI.1). He also chatted with others while doing exercise in the gym (WN.4).
Feeling efficacious and supported, Wei reported enjoyment in his study (WI.1). His academic record reveals that he achieved over 60% across all Level 5 units (W.T), indicating that he was on track for a 2.1 degree. His adaptive coping strategies such as investing in organised effort, discussing with his teachers and befriending English native speakers contributed to positive learning outcomes. His heightened academic self-efficacy, reduced fear of fear, a learning goal pursuit, and improved academic record are all indicators of his full academic recovery at Level 5.

8.5 Level 6—a period of resilience

Having struggled at Level 4 and recovered at Level 5, Wei appeared to be resilient and more academically self-efficacious at Level 6. Some distinct changes in him include: focusing more on the subject areas than on the language; adopting learning goals and enjoying the learning process. To understand the context of this period, I will now recount my class observations at Level 6.

8.5.1 Wei’s class observations

Apart from the GL6 and BC3 classes, I also observed Understanding Britain Today, which Wei suggested as the most interesting (WN.3), and a Payment and Law lecture, which Wei recognised as the most challenging. Payment and Law was a core unit and was mentioned by other participants as the most difficult unit (WN.3). I observed two lectures, which has already been described in Ting’s case study. Therefore, I only intend to present one lesson about Understanding Britain Today, a unit delivered by four teachers using ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973).

A snapshot of the British Culture lesson (11/10/2013)

At 3pm, I come to the bright seminar room with a horseshoe layout. 19 students including 17 Chinese and two European students have already arrived. Wei occupies the first seat by the door and I sit in the opposite row across the room to observe him clearly.

The teacher rushes in from a previous class. She briefly explains the structure of the class, which is divided between lecture and seminar discussions. She also reminds the students that they should focus on listening instead of taking notes from PPT slides during the lecture as all the information is available on Moodle.

The lesson starts. On the PPT slides are outlines of the lecture content. The teacher appears to be very enthusiastic about her subject, talking to her students through both verbal and body language about the functions of British political power. The majority of the students appear to be engaged, their eyes following the teacher with interest.
Probably realising the rich vocabulary involved in the lecture, the teacher pauses to ask the students whether they can follow her. Several students nod their heads, including Wei, who appears to be very interested, his body leaning forward, his eyes following the teacher, smiling and nodding his head occasionally.

After a brief interval, during which time the teacher checks students’ availability to visit the local court to experience the British judiciary system, the class moves on to seminar discussion. The teacher asks students to discuss two questions based on the two articles they were given as homework in groups for 10 minutes. At the same time, she walks around to answer students’ questions. Wei appears to be in deep discussion with his neighbour. When the teacher approaches him, he asks her some questions.

Then the teacher checks students’ understanding of the two questions. Wei promptly answers one. He seems to have understood the topic very well (WO.5).

The three other classes that I subsequently observed were similar in structure and effects, and the only variation was that the seminar part was replaced by students’ group presentations. Most students seemed to be very attentive to the teacher, who demonstrated her lessons with exceptional enthusiasm. Wei seemed to be fascinated by the lessons, asking the teacher questions and volunteering to answer her questions on several occasions (WO.6; WO.7; WO.9).

In contrast to his enthusiasm in this unit, Wei appeared to be much less committed to his GL6 lessons, which involved group activities in grammar, reading comprehension and summary writing. He sat in the last row of the classroom which had a traditional desk layout. Sometimes he joined in group work, but most of the time he appeared to be reading on his phone quietly. Once the teacher asked the students to write down a summary in groups, I heard him saying to his neighbour in Chinese: “I am not going to write; it’s not interesting at all” (WO.4; WO.8).

It was probably the material which caused Wei’s boredom, which did not seem to be meaningful or challenging for him, given the fact that his language skills had been much improved and his chief concern was about learning the content knowledge for his future study, which a language class did not seem to satisfy. This hypothesis is further supported by his comments on this unit:

The GL6 teacher is responsible, but some activities are meaningless. For example, writing a descriptive summary. It’s purely language-based and it has nothing to do with my future course. That’s why I do not feel interested in class. I learned more from those content classes, including the specialist vocabulary (WN.7).
Likewise, Wei did not exhibit much enthusiasm in his BC 3 class, where there was no pair or group work. Like the majority of the class who appeared to be quiet and uninterested, I noticed that Wei was constantly shifting his attention between reading from his mobile phone and listening to the teacher (WO.10; WO.11). In our later talk, Wei expressed his dissatisfaction with his BC3 lessons, saying that they were “useless” and he “learned nothing”:

The BC 3 teacher is irresponsible. He just reads the answers without caring about whether we understand it. He gives low marks. Then he gives careless feedback. As it is very general, you do not know how to improve an essay even after reading it. When you ask him, he will give you a vague answer. You just feel that he is extremely irresponsible (WN.7).

Chinese students tend to view teachers who do not seem to care about their learning as ‘irresponsible’. The impression that his BC3 teacher left on him was probably due to the teacher’s lack of interaction with the students in class. As part of the University evaluation system, students could have their voice heard through Course Feedback Form conducted at the end of each TB, or through class Course Reps. However, I am unaware whether he did it with this unit.

The structure of curriculum design and the way of teaching can affect Chinese university students’ interest in classroom learning (Kember, Hong, & Ho, 2008). The BC teacher’s teaching style and the seemingly irrelevant content in GL6 lessons could have triggered Wei’s apparent lack of interest in these lessons. Nevertheless, he reported still treating the assignments from these units seriously because both units consisted of a portfolio and an exam. As indicated by Wei’s academic report (W.T), he obtained a high mark (70%) for his GL6, but a relatively low mark (50s) for his BC3.

8.5.2 Continuing to sharpen his language skills

Motivated by achieving high scores and the goal of entering a top five UK university for his Master’s degree, Wei reported continuing to improve his language through organised effort in combination with more effective learning strategies at Level 6. The focus was now more on specialist vocabulary as well as grammar.

While he had improved his vocabulary strategy at Level 5 (8.4.2), Wei demonstrated the competence of a successful language learner at Level 6: one that is self-motivated, adopts flexible learning strategies such as learning through context, using the dictionary, taking notes and reviewing new vocabulary regularly (Gu, 2003). One key feature was his distributed practice of repetition and association of a list of words. He would “go over each word 10-20 times”, and “recall the context in which a word occurred, together with that part of the lesson”. Using his mobile phone to keep the word list, he was able to review the words and “flip though the list occasionally the next week” till he remembered them (WI.3).
Wei became more reflective about his own learning and more proactive in addressing his problems at this stage. Realising that his poor grammar was preventing him from obtaining higher essay scores, he was determined to tackle it through various means:

_It’s frustrating to know that you have wonderful ideas but you cannot achieve over 70% or 80% because of the bottleneck—grammar. I tried to learn from grammar books, but it’s not useful. ‘Mick’ gets busy with freshmen. He will point out the language mistakes only in the first paragraph….The subject teachers would point out the problems with my ideas but not grammar….My English friends would help me but I do not think they know how to improve my grammar _(WN.4)._

Determined to address the problem, Wei turned to me for help, but also stressed repeatedly:

_I do not want others to improve my essays directly. Otherwise, it’s no different from copying to me. The score is not mine. I do not want to know what, but to learn why and how _(WN.4; WN.7)._

Knowing that he was trying to engage himself in deep learning rather than just improving the performance, and feeling reassured that my help would be ethical if I did not change the content of his essays, I subsequently helped him identify the grammar mistakes in several of his content-related essays but left him to improve them. Wei sometimes also asked me for further feedback on the grammar that he had improved and benefitted much from this process, saying that “_after asking people about my questions, for example grammar, for one hour, I work them out carefully for over two hours, till I fully understand_” _(WN.5)._ The motivation to understand and to improve clearly indicates that Wei was pursuing a learning goal.

The extra work helped me to gain some invaluable insights into Wei’s resilience _(WN.4-5; WN.7-8; WN.10),_ which might have been difficult to obtain otherwise. I could understand his prioritizing his subject areas with his improved self-efficacy in his language use in TB2, Level 6 through our informal talks as well as the interviews _(WI.3; WI.4; WN.4; WN.8; WN.13)._

_It’s good to feel that I have improved (in language). I no longer listen to BBC because I do not have the time. I have been too busy reading my subject books. I can improve grammar pointed out by you or the Project teacher by myself…. It takes practice. Also, my Project teacher told me that teachers will not focus too much on grammar as long as they understand my writing _(WI.4)._

Similar remarks suggest that Wei began to assess his L2 learning process in more favourable light, admitting his own weaknesses as an L2 learner without feeling too negative about himself. Such self-reflection and subsequent measures taken allowed Wei to further reduce the discrepancy between the ideal self and the actual self in L2 learning.
8.5.3 Enhancing essay writing skills

Wei’s successful acceptance by a Russell group UK university in February 2014 motivated him to make more effort to further improve his essay writing skills via extensive reading, self-reflection and teacher feedback. A salient feature was his combination of the two goals of achieving high marks and self-improvement in the learning process. An example is Payment and Law. Due to the difficulty of the unit and the incomprehensibility of the lecturer (WN.3; WI.4), many students were worried about failing this unit. Anecdotal evidence suggested that some students even bought their essays to pass this unit (WN.7). Despite this climate, Wei appeared to be self-efficacious in writing this essay owing to his preparation:

*I understand the lectures because I spend at least a couple of days preparing for every lecture. I am not worried about the 2000 word essay either, as I can understand the course. I am a bit confident. I just have a feeling that I will not fail. But I still worry and try my best to get a higher mark* (WN.7).

Up until this time, one of the salient features in Wei’s essay coping strategy had been ‘defensive pessimism’, which is defined as “a strategy of setting low expectations (being pessimistic) and then thinking through, in concrete and vivid detail, all the things that might go wrong as one prepares for an upcoming situation or task” (Norem, 2008, p.123). Norem (2008) also argues that “motivated by both the desire to avoid failure and the motivation to achieve success” (p.125), defensive pessimists do not ruminate about the past but focus on the future. This means that they could make an effort to take concrete actions to stop the possible problems hindering their success. Due to defensive pessimism, he would undergo laborious effort to deal with each essay task:

*I spent over one month writing it. I had many questions while studying it, and I had to spend much time reviewing the cases after each class. I still spent lots of time reading books when writing* (WN.7; WI.4).

However, effort alone could not have contributed to his high marks. The learning strategies play an equally significant role in students’ learning. Summarising his improvement from a low academic level, Wei said that “hard work alone is not enough; there should be direction” (WI.4). Wei’s self-reports reveal that he not only discussed with the lecturer teaching this unit several times (WI.4), but also consulted a teacher with expertise in this area to clarify some issues (WN.8). The direction provided by the teachers both before and after the writing process motivated him to achieve higher scores and deep learning, as for instance when writing his Project:

*If I have problems, I just ask the teachers.... After I get the results, I will visit the teacher to ask questions related to the essays, including those that are over 70%. I want to improve* (WI.4).
Wei expanded his reading to reach a deeper level of discussion. Speaking of the 40 references in his final Project (WN.10), he told me that he “did not cite them carelessly but only when they were really useful” (WI.4), after he had discussed his essay feedback three times with his Project tutor and “obtained more invaluable suggestions” (WN.13). Wei’s high efforts were rewarded with a high mark of 76% with the following feedback from the Project teacher:

*The project is well referenced and there is a substantial, accurately–formatted bibliography... a very good, mature, well-presented piece of work, in which the student demonstrates a sound understanding of the issues and the expectations of a piece of academic work (WN. 16).*

8.5.4 Changing his conceptions of learning

Perhaps not incidentally, the progress of learning also changed Wei’s conceptions of learning, noticeably in his view about the teacher-student relationship:

*Since I was young, I have always believed that teachers know everything, and they are ‘invincible’, so I do not feel comfortable when teachers here tell me they do not know something.... At least in China, we do not expect a teacher to say: “Find me in a couple of days; I need to consult some books”* (WI.3).

Wei felt that the honesty of UK teachers allowed him to “ask the teachers questions comfortably” (WI.3), which means that he began to accept that knowledge is co-built between the teacher and learners in the learning process rather than possessed by the teacher as the authority. This can be observed in his understanding of English essay writing. He said that whereas he would pack too much information in an essay without in-depth discussions previously, now he learned to “focus on a few themes, explore deeper and provide enough details to support them” (WI.4; WN.11). Explaining the use of sound argumentation based on evidence, Wei said:

*I spend much more time than the average student. Others may spend only a couple of days on a 1000-word essay, but I spend a month, reading and checking repeatedly. Then I know better how to write essays. Good argumentation is essential. We need to do much research to achieve that. When others use only 5-6 references, I may provide more than 20…. We need to find evidence to support what we think* (WI.4).

Navigating his way into the English writing conventions was “an enjoyable but troubling process” for Wei (WI.4), which also allowed him to obtain high marks in essays. Wei’s motivation to improve his essays went beyond the marks themselves. He appeared to be using the marks as a yardstick to calibrate his own progress, to decrease the discrepancy between the ideal self and the actual self (Dorynyei, 2009). Wei’s positive learning outcomes support the argument that an extrinsic award such as high
marks could also increase students’ value towards learning, but only when the award is not used as self-aggrandising but as feedback for self-improvement (Covington, 1999).

8.5.5 Becoming academically resilient

Sufficient evidence indicates that Wei achieved ‘academic resilience’ (Morale, 2008) by the end of his learning journey. The factors that are conducive to the growth of academic resilience as suggested by the literature (Martin & Marsh, 2006), for example, self-efficacy, goal-setting, self-control, persistence, low anxiety and tolerance to stress, mirror Wei’s development and personal growth through his undergraduate study.

8.5.5.1 Remaining highly self-regulated

Self-regulated learning (SRL) was a key feature of Wei’s resilience at Level 6. Zimmerman (2008) holds that SRL involves goal setting, employing strategies and using metacognitive strategies to monitor one’s own progress. High self-control is needed for students to resist distractions and concentrate on their studies and to realize their academic goals. Self-control, or the ability to regulate the self strategically in response to goals, priorities and environmental demands, can lead to better academic achievement, better adjustment and resilience (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004, p.314).

Wei’s high self-control as demonstrated by his ability to prioritize study time has been discussed previously. The focus here is on his self-control to avoid an unfavourable subculture he was exposed to. Claiming to have witnessed many instances of plagiarism among some Chinese students who passed their assessment through cheating (WN.4; WN.11), Wei tried to become more detached from them:

_I avoid their company. I stay in the library most of the time. I just wonder how they expect to achieve anything without doing anything. Some of them are here doing nothing. They buy their essays…. They do not want to make a change in themselves_ (WI.4; WN.4; WN.5; WN.10).

The values exhibited by some of his compatriots such as low work ethic and showing off were in obvious contradiction to Wei’s ideal self, which embodied such values as honest effort, modesty and self-esteem. He was determined to rise above them:

_Some students came with a high IELTS score at 7, but get only around 50% for their essays because they are just too proud and do not study in a down-to-earth manner….Perhaps I had a little dream of becoming different from them. Probably because I have seen many people in my home town do business abroad since I was young. They are down-to-earth. Even the very rich do not show off_ (WN.4; WI.4).
Interestingly, Wei reported not feeling lonely even without his Chinese compatriots’ company because of his enjoyment in socialising with home students, and achieving cultural assimilation:

*I joined in the gym when I was a fresher...I meet lots of native speakers, and people from other countries. We chat about everything. Now I understand people’s accent ...I know almost all the things the teachers discuss in Understanding Britain Today, as they are all common topics in the gym (WN.4).*

Wei’s effort at cultural assimilation further narrowed down the discrepancy between his actual self and his ideal self. Furthermore, the close contact with home students also helped him to change his impressions of British people, whom he initially described as very “cold” and “discriminating against people from other countries” (WI.1; WI.2). Indeed, he came to appreciate the culture characteristic of individualism, saying “I like this culture. People do not stay together as a group. They are very independent” (WI.4). It was likely that his integration into the British culture helped contribute to his sense of belonging and satisfaction at his learning experience.

8.5.5.2 Demonstrating an optimal level of self-efficacy

A growth mindset that Wei was holding appears to have been a strong motivator for him to persevere despite academic challenges. The high marks that he had obtained via flexible coping strategies further convinced him that “ability comes with practice. Because you prepare for the exams and essays, you pass them, and your ability comes naturally” (WI.4). The positive learning outcomes allowed him to move from defensive pessimism to a reasonable level of academic self-efficacy in TB2, Level 6.

Wei’s development in academic self-efficacy appears to have been associated with his reduced fear of failure. In TB1 of Level 4, fear of failure left him helpless due to the huge discrepancy between his ideal self and his actual self. With increased strategies and improved self-efficacy from Level 5, however, a lower level of fear of failure motivated him to adopt defensive pessimism. Our conversation in TB1, Level 6 suggests that he had acquired what Bandura (1982) calls an optimal level of self-efficacy, which means that Wei’s self-efficacy was slightly above his current level of competence. The optimal level of self-efficacy allowed him to face academic challenges and persevere:

*In the past, when I wrote an essay, I was always worried that I could not pass it. My basic line was to get over 40. I still do although my essays are all over 60% now. As I worry about failure, I try to take a long time to do it, and the more I do it, the happier I feel... I enjoy the process. Yes, I am a bit more confident now. But I still worry and try my best to get a higher score. Every time I get the result of the essays, I will not get excited because I feel I deserve that. For a 1000-word essay, I spend about a couple of months. You are only excited when you won a lottery, but you do not grow excited over your hard-earned salary (WI.3; WI.4).*
Holding a growth mindset together with an optimal level of self-efficacy contributed to Wei’s positive learning outcomes. While a growth mindset led to his effort and perseverance in the pursuit of learning goals, an optimal level of self-efficacy allowed him to guard against complacency as a result of overconfidence, as suggested by his remarks:

_I feel people maintain their best when they keep a low profile and are not so confident about themselves. People might think I have achieved a lot, but I do not think so. I still have a lot to improve_ (WN.4).

8.5.5.3 Enjoying the learning process

It takes a facilitating environment for individuals to draw resources from and to extend meaning to a task (Ungar, 2011). The supportive learning environment, when meeting a growth mindset creates the perfect conditions for an individual like Wei to combine effort and strategy use, to face the challenges, problem-focused and to enjoy the learning process at Level 6.

Wei seemed to have inherited a strong growth mindset from socialisation. On several occasions, he mentioned the positive influence from his parents and the business people in his home town:

_Once I want to do something, I want to do it well. I think I am influenced by my parents. They are very hard-working. People in my home-town are all hard-working. My parents did not teach me the concept of hard work, but I learned it from an early age from my environment. In my hometown, there is a famous saying: No pain, no gain_ (WI.3; WI.4).

The alignment between Wei’s cultural belief in effort and his perception of the UK educational focus on “learning step by step” (WI.4), and the autonomy-support from the professionals sustained his interest and effort in tasks, which might otherwise have been viewed as tedious:

_Here in the UK, if you are interested in something and you want to do it well, the only way to achieve it is through hard work...This is a big difference from China, where teachers spoon-feed students everything, including things they don’t like. Here I am doing everything that I like_ (WI.3; WI.4).

According to (Deci & Ryan, 1990, p.240), “value endorsement, behavioural persistence, conceptual understanding, personal adjustment, and positive coping” contribute to students’ pursuit of learner autonomy. Wei’s remarks at Level 6 reveal that he had become more self-determined in learning. This positivity is also associated with his personal growth—he became more futuristic and readier for challenges. This can be seen from his choosing ‘Discuss the UK financial policy in relation to the EU monetary system’ for Understanding Britain Today unit, because he thought “this might be related to my future study. I like the challenge from learning something new...I enjoy the feeling of flow” (WI.4).
Martin (2002) suggests that students are likely to be engaged in their subjects and attain better academic outcomes when they value what they learn for its purposefulness and importance. The sense of autonomy that Wei gained from the learning process enhanced his appreciation towards his course:

As I have fewer and fewer essays left, I feel the graduation day is approaching...it’s like count-down. I am very much emotionally attached to my course. The way you’d feel when you enjoy a sports match but it is almost over (WI.4; WN.8).

Wei’s strong inclination towards a growth mindset allowed him to make use of the supportive environment; in particular, obtaining guidance from the LST and teachers from an early stage appears to have been crucial for him to adjust, re-bounce and enjoy the learning process at Level 6. Wei’s summary of his learning journey indicates that he had replaced his initial fear of failure and low academic self-efficacy with high self-efficacy and academic resilience:

I just feel it’s not easy for me to achieve the result...But now that I have moved up step by step, I am not willing to retreat again...I feel students at the bottom, once they are given the platform, they will change. I know I will experience a lot more difficulties doing my Master’s in the future, but I am not worried. Having hitting rock bottom, I will not be afraid of falling down again (WN.4; WI.4).

8.6 Summary and discussion

8.6.1 Summary

Wei initially displayed all the signs of a potential university dropout: Low academic self-efficacy, high fear of failure and low academic scores but he graduated a first-class degree, got accepted by a top five UK University, and more importantly, he transformed himself into a resilient learner after three years’ study in the UK. Largely owing to his growth mindset, he was able to utilise what was offered by the university and invest consistent effort and time in learning. Certainly, Chinese cultural values in education and beliefs in effort that he acquired through socialisation also impacted his academic coping process so that he learned to adopt adaptive coping strategies, adjusted his approaches to learning, and achieved positive learning outcomes in both academic achievement and cultural integration. Table 8.2 summarizes his progress of various stages, based on which further discussions are made to address the research questions.
Table 8.2: Wei’s 3-year development from Level 4 to Level 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
<th>Level 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic difficulties</td>
<td>All 4 language skills; writing English essays; dealing with examinations</td>
<td>Technical vocabulary; essay writing skills</td>
<td>Grammar; writing essays with more depth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindset</td>
<td>Growth mindset</td>
<td>Growth mindset</td>
<td>Growth mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>From performance goal to multiple goal</td>
<td>Learning goal</td>
<td>Learning goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping styles</td>
<td>Problem-avoidance in TB1 but problem-focused in TB2</td>
<td>Problem-focused</td>
<td>Problem-focused; proactive coping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
<td>High effort, self-regulation; seeking help from the LST</td>
<td>High effort; self-reflection; self-regulation; seeking both professional and native speaker help</td>
<td>High effort; self-reflection; seeking professional help; experiential learning through the gym; proactive coping, independent study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with others</td>
<td>LST and more able peers</td>
<td>LST and teachers</td>
<td>Subject teachers and native speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to study</td>
<td>Surface learning in TB1, but deep and strategic learning in TB2</td>
<td>Strategic and deep</td>
<td>Deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic self-efficacy</td>
<td>Initially weak but a little improved in TB2</td>
<td>Improved</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of failure</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievements</td>
<td>Mostly between 40%-50%</td>
<td>Mostly over 60%</td>
<td>Mostly over 70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with learning</td>
<td>From low to moderate</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Highest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.6.2 Discussion

Q1. What academic difficulties did he experience and how did he try to cope with them?

Wei experienced and managed to cope with a variety of academic difficulties at different stages of his undergraduate study, ranging from improving his language skills, following the English essay writing conventions and learning to deal with the UK examinations, to adjusting his expectations of his teachers.
and his peers. While he coped with his studies chiefly through high effort, he also learned to adopt other strategies and adjust them flexibly in order to achieve better academic outcomes.

At the start of his University life, his low level of English became the first hurdle to overcome. His low competence in English prevented him from understanding the lessons, engaging in group work and completing his assignments. His lack of knowledge and training in the English writing conventions left him with low self-efficacy, which further resulted in fear of failure and negative emotion coping.

Seeking the LST’s help in TB2 of Level 4 was a turning point for his later changes. He started to face his problems with strong self-regulation in combination with effective learning strategies: he made plans to improve the language and essay writing skills, and discussed with teachers based on their feedback. A virtuous cycle of learning began to emerge from TB2 of Level 4, continued to develop at Level 5, and matured at Level 6. Demonstrating a consistent inclination towards a growth mindset, he was making use of every opportunity for academic improvement and cultural integration so that by the end of his study, he became academically resilient.

Q2. What changes did he experience in his coping strategies and why?

As coping resources play a significant role in affecting individuals’ perception of a difficult situation (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), Wei’s changes from problem-avoidance coping to problem-focused coping and eventually, proactive coping mirror the improvement in his coping resources and his self-efficacy.

In TB1 of Level 4, Wei reported intense fear of failure due to few coping strategies available. His remarks such as ‘scared’, ‘worried’, ‘overwhelming’, ‘suicide’, ‘torment’, ‘burden’, ‘curse’, and ‘angry’ (WI.1-WI.4) indicated strong fear of failure due to his low academic self-efficacy, leading to his problem-avoidance coping (8.3.1). Starting from TB2 of Level 4, however, he started to adopt effective strategies with the help of the LST. Wei’s later use of such expressions as ‘fun’, ‘enthusiastic’, ‘always talked to teachers’, ‘spent more time improving it’, ‘more confident’, and ‘not afraid’ (WI.1-WI.4) suggest the gradual decrease in fear of failure and increase in self-efficacy, which in turn motivated him towards more self-regulated learning at Level 5 and Level 6 (8.4).

Evidence at Level 6 suggests that he became proactive in coping. Defined as “effort undertaken in advance of a potentially stressful event to prevent it or to modify its form before it occurs” (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997, p.417), proactive coping “enables individuals to prevent, offset, eliminate, reduce, or modify impending stressful events” (ibid, p.431). Moreover, the ‘flow’ feeling (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005) via the process of deep learning also motivated him to take up academic challenges (8.5.4), which indicates his academic resilience.
The interactions between Wei’s beliefs and his learning environment contributed to his positive changes. Wei consistently demonstrated a strong growth mindset, which motivated him to remain highly self-regulated in learning. The problem-based teaching in the UK, which can promote learning for understanding as students learn by solving problems via teacher support (Hmelo-Silver, 2004), in contrast to the ‘spoon-fed’ teaching in China, provided the incentive for Wei to engage in deep learning. Also, the guidance from the LST and the teachers channelled him into employing adaptive strategies. With each progress followed his improved academic self-efficacy, reduced fear of failure and increased level of enjoyment of the learning process.

Q3. How did Chinese culture influence his academic coping?

Chinese cultural values of seeing academic achievement as obedience to their family, and achieving success through effort and perseverance (Ho et al., 2008; Salili & Kai, 2003; Tao & Hong, 2014) had obviously exerted significant influences on Wei’s academic coping. Some literature suggests that compared with Western students, Chinese students are more likely to attribute their academic performance to effort rather than ability as a result of their social upbringing (Salili & Lai, 2003; Tao & Hong, 2014). The growth mindset that Wei acquired through socialisation appeared to be the very asset that helped him to ‘bounce back’ after verging on academic failure and to strive hard over the years despite all challenges.

Admittedly, fear of failure as part of his pursuit of social goals was also evident in Wei’s learning process. What helped him to become increasingly self-efficacious and to reduce his fear of failure was a growth mindset. A growth mindset allowed him to believe in improving the situation via effort and strategy, and the positive learning outcomes from these strategies contributed to a reduction in fear of failure. This concerns with the literature that when the distance between the actual self and the feared self (or the undesired state) is too close, there is strong motivation for an individual to avoid it; if the distance is not so close, there is less motivation to evade it and hence, the person may become self-regulated and make an effort to achieve the desired state (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999). Indeed, a moderate level of fear allowed Wei to adopt defensive pessimism, motivating him to invest more effort and search for more adaptive coping strategies, leading to further improvement, a process which seems to have involved both learning and performance goals.

Wei’s positive learning outcomes gives further evidence to the literature that the co-existence of multiple-goal pursuits in achievement situations may help students (Pintrich, 2003). More specifically, mastery goals and performance goals, rather than being in conflict with each other as reported in Western students, can be integrated in Chinese students’ learning process (Tao & Hong, 2014). This is because, as Wei’s case demonstrates, Chinese students internalise their social goals and values into their
personal system, they tend to see their academic achievement as an obligatory endeavour to bring fame and honour to the family, and therefore, they are more likely to exert themselves through extra effort, a topic which has been discussed elsewhere (Tao & Hong, 2014).
Chapter 9 Cross-case study

9.1 Introduction

The learning trajectories of the four individual students indicate that despite experiencing similar academic challenges during their transition from Chinese education to UK HE, they achieved different learning outcomes. A comparison between the challenges they encountered, the strategies they adopted and the learning outcomes achieved, this chapter aims to answer the four research questions formulated in Chapter 4. Based on these findings, a framework for interpreting Chinese international students’ learning experiences is constructed.

9.2 What were the main academic difficulties experienced by the Chinese international students and how did they cope with them?

The participants appeared to have encountered similar academic challenges at the beginning of their UK study, including the use of English as a second language (i.e., listening, reading, vocabulary and speaking), a lack of familiarity with English essay writing (e.g., using references and developing argumentation) and adapting to the new conceptions of learning (i.e., requirements for learner autonomy and deep learning). While Zihao, Ting and Wei overcame these academic difficulties and improved their learning over two to three years, Dan demonstrated little evidence of improvement in these areas. Table 9.1 further compares and contrasts how each individual coped with these challenges.

Table 9.1: A comparison of students’ academic challenges and improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic issues</th>
<th>Changes</th>
<th>Zihao</th>
<th>Ting</th>
<th>Wei</th>
<th>Dan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay writing</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep learning</td>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Legend ‘✓’, ‘x’ and ‘?’ represent ‘presence’, ‘absence’ and ‘uncertainty’ of evidence, respectively)
Findings from this study also suggest that students’ low levels of English affected their understanding in seminars and lectures, interacting with English peers, and reading materials and writing essays. Challenges in these areas lowered their academic self-efficacy at different stages of learning. Wei’s weakened language self-efficacy led to his negative emotion coping (skipping classes, rumination and procrastination (8.3.1). Similar experiences in addition to her disappointment in her course content left Dan amotivated (7.3). Zihao initially appeared to have a strong self-efficacy in his language use. However, his struggles began when his subject learning intensified at Level 6. Unable to understand the lectures properly, to read materials efficiently or to participate in group discussions due to his inadequate study skills and a lack of specialist vocabulary (5.4.3), he became less efficacious and resorted to negative emotion coping (rumination, reduced effort and procrastination) (5.4.5; 5.4.6). By contrast, Ting’s self-efficacy did not seem to have been affected by her low language competences as a result of her strong belief in improvement through organised effort and better strategy use from the start (6.3).

The study suggests that participants’ perceptions of the language challenges varied between those who were studying alongside their Chinese colleagues and those studying alongside home students. Wei and Ting, who were studying mainly alongside their compatriots, seemed to experience less language obstacles as their courses progressed, possibly due to their improvement in language levels and in understanding of their courses and possibly to teachers’ efforts in accommodating students’ needs by using such techniques as repeating messages, simplifying their language and slowing down their speed during teaching. By contrast, both Zihao (5.4.4) and Dan (7.5.6), who were studying alongside home students for their subject areas, expressed their frustrations about their low efficiency in understanding the lectures at Level 6 for a lack of specialist vocabulary. This may also be due to the fact they needed native speakers’ language proficiency to cope with those units, which Zihao and Dan appeared to have been unprepared for.

In general, however, holding an apparent growth mindset enabled Zihao, Ting and Wei to make successful adaptation by seeking support from teachers and learning support tutors (Zihao and Wei), or from more able peers (Ting) after their initial struggles. By contrast, the language inadequacy that Dan experienced from Level 4 (7.3.1) lasted till the end of her three-year course (7.5.6). Consistently showing more of a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006), she demonstrated disbelief in improving her learning through effort or strategies, which led to her approaching the language issues by dwelling on her own frustrations or blaming external causes such as the curriculum design and a lack of opportunity for interaction with native speakers rather than attempting to overcome the language barrier through greater effort and better strategies (7.3.1; 7.4.1; 7.5.6). The contrast between Dan and the other participants can also be observed in their coping with their essay writing, as follows.
9.2.2 Challenges in essay writing

What appears particularly challenging for these students is to understand and synthesize information necessary for writing an essay in English as a second language. A lack of proper training in their previous English Chinese education may have contributed to this. More importantly, their subsequent strategy use led to variations in their learning outcomes.

Patch-writing (Howard, 1999), or patching up information from books or online sources without citing the references was the principal strategy that the participants employed to complete their essay tasks initially, as seen in Ting at Level 5 (6.3.3), in Wei at Level 4 (8.3.1) and in Zihao at Level 5 and TB1 at Level 6 (5.5.1). Moreover, having been used to Chinese essay writing, which allows quoting other sources without providing the references (Jin & Cortazzi, 2011), these students did not appear to pay sufficient attention to referencing. This was despite the fact that reference use was included in the curriculum for both the PSE and in-sessional language courses, and listed as a key marking scheme criterion for essay writing in student handbooks. Consequently, Ting reported a near fail in one unit due to her poor referencing at Level 5 (6.3.3) and Dan spoke of her continued confusion about using proper referencing at the end of her course (7.5.5).

Consistent with the previous literature (Durkin, 2008), which suggests that students’ development of argumentation ability is linked to their familiarity with the learning environment as well as their language improvement, both of which allow them to better understand their teachers. The study also shows that it takes much longer for the participants to develop argumentation than referencing skills, and that the differences in their ability to use critical argument are closely related to their seeking professional help.

Zihao did not know how to be ‘critical’ in reading and writing until highlighted in essay feedback at Level 6 (5.5.3). By self-reflection, consulting with teachers, discussing with peers and investing more time and effort, he succeeded in developing his skills in essay writing and exhibited self-efficacy in applying the skills to subsequent academic tasks (5.5). Ting, likewise, did not become aware of the differences between English and Chinese argumentative essays until Level 6, when she learned from her project tutorials (6.4.7). Wei acquired the skills of critical argument from Level 5 through frequent discussions with his teachers (8.4.3; 8.5.3).

Compared to the other participants, Dan did not seem to have developed the competence in critical argumentation, although she became aware of the issue at level 6 (7.5.4). Demonstrating characteristics of a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006) and driven by performance goals only, Dan did not believe in change through effort and was reluctant to accept criticism or seek professional help (7.5.4), leaving the essay issue unresolved throughout her course of study (7.4.2; 7.5.4).
9.2.3 Challenges in conceptions of learning

The conflict between their conceptions of learning and those required by UK HE was a main academic challenge encountered by Chinese students. According to Vermunt and Verrmetten (2004, p.362), a conception of learning is “a coherent system of knowledge and beliefs about learning and related phenomena” consisting of “knowledge and beliefs about oneself as a learner, learning objectives, learning activities and strategies, learning tasks, learning and studying in general, and about the task division between students, teachers, and fellow students in learning processes”. Previous literature (Gu, 2009; Gu & Maley, 2008; Turner, 2006) suggests that Chinese students’ conceptions of learning formed from their previous education can lead to ‘learning shock’ for Chinese international students during their transition to UK universities (Gu, 2009). Instances of learning shock are also found in this study.

It is likely that due to the influence of the teacher-centred Chinese education, students in this study initially tended to see knowledge as fixed; to passively accept the knowledge learned from teachers; to memorise what was offered on the syllabus to prepare for the examinations and to expect teachers to reach out to them (5.3.4; 7.3.3; 8.3.1). Clearly, these conceptions of learning are in conflict with the educational practices in UK HE, where students are encouraged to construct knowledge through interactions with teachers and discussions with peers both in and outside the classroom, to take responsibility for their own learning, and to solve problems through tutorials and independent study (2.4). Developing their conception of learning to break away from their old conceptions and adapting to the new ones appeared crucial for their transition to their new learning environment.

Assessments had the most impact on students’ changes in their conceptions of learning, which can be seen from students’ reactions towards their first UK examinations. Having been familiar with the Chinese assessment that took place in the form of examinations, which required accurate memorisation (2.2), Zihao reported preparing diligently for the examination by memorising the test banks, consistent with his past learning experience in China at Level 5, only to be shocked by the low mark he achieved (5.3.4). Likewise, both Dan and Wei recalled mechanically memorising the test bank to prepare for their first examinations but failed one unit each at Level 4 (7.3.3; 8.3.1). After they realised the connections between understanding and high marks, the participants reported changes from simply mechanically memorising facts to preparing for the examinations via understanding, a major breakthrough in their ability to adjust UK HE.

The transition from rote learning to learning through understanding may involve significant confusion and frustration. Zihao struggled over the concept of building knowledge through critical thinking and reading until TB2, Level 6 (5.5), after his discussions with his teachers. By contrast, Dan modified only part of her conceptions of learning. She focussed on understanding but did not change her belief that knowledge should be transmitted to students by the teacher as the authority (7.3.3; 7.5.4). Most importantly, she was adamant that she could not take charge of her own learning without teachers’
explicit supervision (7.4.3; 7.5.3). By contrast, Wei and Ting did not experience as much confusion regarding their conceptions of learning, which might be explained by the fact that they had not expended effort using and developing ingrained surface strategies linked to the teacher-led conceptions of learning in China. This helped make them start the transition from the start of their UK education. A growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), characterised by a willingness to try different strategies in learning, allowed both students to seek out adaptive help from either more able peers or teachers, making their transition to the new learning environment more quickly and less affected by ‘learning shock’.

Perkins (2008) distinguishes three kinds of knowledge or understanding that students focus on acquiring through learning: Possessive knowledge, performative knowledge and proactive knowledge, each corresponding to a different approach to learning (Table 9.2 below). Whereas possessive knowledge requires students to obtain isolated bits of information (surface learning), performative knowledge requires them to understand just enough to deal with the demands of their subjects (strategic learning), proactive knowledge is the combination of understanding and novel application, which “requires alertness to occasion, a positive attitude towards following through, and, of course, the knowledge and ability to follow through” (Perkins, 2008, p.10).

Table 9.2: Relationships between knowledge acquisition and approaches to learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three kinds of knowledge acquisition</th>
<th>via</th>
<th>Approaches to learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td></td>
<td>Surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td></td>
<td>Deep approach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

McCune and Entwistle (2011) extend proactive knowledge to ‘a disposition to understand for oneself’, which goes beyond the focus on the intention to understand:

The disposition to understand for oneself depends on similar learning strategies but with a broader focus directed towards the discipline as a whole, while the intention to understand is more wide ranging and involves an ongoing and strong desire to understand that carries with it a recognisable emotional charge. The disposition also involves an awareness of the process of learning within specific contexts that leads to the monitoring of understanding in relation to both specific tasks and the discipline as a whole (p.305).

Participants’ development in their conceptions of learning fit the descriptions in Table 9.2 above. Whereas under the influence of Chinese education, all participants held the ‘possessive’ view of knowledge acquisition, which they could obtain through rote learning, they changed it towards the
‘performative’ view, which they needed to combine with strategic learning. The differences, however, lies in their changes in terms of the ‘proactive’ view. Whereas there are clear indications in the development of Ting, Wei and Zihao, such a level of understanding was absent in Dan. Students’ conceptions of learning also affected their differences in coping strategies, which will be illustrated next.

9.3 Which specific academic coping strategies did these students adopt?

One of the main focuses of this study was to explore individual students’ variations in the use of coping strategies. This section critically analyses participants’ strategy use with reference to the literature.

9.3.1 Comparing their coping strategies

Participants’ coping with their academic challenges can be generalised into two broad types: One is problem-focused, represented by adaptive coping strategies such as planning, seeking social support, and positive restructuring; the other is problem-avoidance coping, represented by strategies such as rumination, avoidance, denial and wishful thinking, as conceptualised by Skinner et al. (2003). The contrasts between participants’ coping strategies are presented in Table 9.3 below.

Table 9.3: The main coping strategies adopted by students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of strategy</th>
<th>Zihao</th>
<th>Wei</th>
<th>Ting</th>
<th>Dan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive coping strategies</td>
<td>Problem-focused: Seeking professional help; discussing with home students; self-reflections; high effort directed to deep learning (wide reading)</td>
<td>Mainly problem-focused and proactive: strong self-regulation (effort, time management, cognitive and metacognitive strategies); seeking professional help (teachers and learning support tutor); socialising with native speakers</td>
<td>Mainly problem-focused coping: Strong self-regulation, (effort, time management); seeking help from able peers; positive restructuring; seeking help from professional help at Level 6; improving language through a part-time job</td>
<td>Occasional problem-focused coping: Temporary self-regulation (effort, time management); Seeking professional help for her Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maladaptive coping strategies</td>
<td>Negative emotion-coping in TB1, Level 6: rumination, procrastination; self-protection in Law seminars</td>
<td>Problem-avoidance coping in TB1, Level 4: Negative emotion-coping, skipping classes</td>
<td>Problem-avoidance: Negative emotions (self-protection in GL5 class); cheating</td>
<td>Problem-avoidance coping: Negative emotions (venting, wishful thinking, procrastination)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As indicated in Table 9.3, while both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies were evident in all participants, Zihao, Wei and Ting demonstrated an adaptive coping pattern. More specifically, although they also turned to problem-avoidance coping when they encountered setbacks or when they found themselves with no coping strategies at different stages of their university life, they were able to develop strong academic self-regulatory strategies, including investing time and effort into deep learning, selecting study environment, and engaging in help-seeking, all of which contributed to positive learning outcomes, as argued by Pintrich (2003). Furthermore, they learned to regulate their negative emotions, sought opportunities to engage in a wider learning opportunity for deep learning and self-improvement.

By contrast, Dan exhibited an overall problem-avoidance coping pattern throughout her entire study. Her perceptions about the mismatch between her expectations and those of the University left her amotivated at Level 4, venting and distancing herself from her study. While she became more accepting of her course at Level 5, her low self-efficacy in self-regulation in combination with the mismatch between her predominant surface learning and the University’s requirement for deep learning caused her to relapse to negative emotion coping such as wishful thinking, venting and withdrawal at Level 6 (7.5.3). Her continuous use of maladaptive coping can be observed in her poor self-regulation of emotion and effort, and reluctance to seek professional help due to her belief in ‘the limited resource theory’ as a consequence of the fixed mindset, a pattern that has been discussed in previous literature (Job et al., 2010). In line with their expectations about studying in an English-speaking country (5.2; 6.2; 7.2; 8.2), improvement through integration into the learning community also appears to be an important concern in Chinese international students’ learning. The next section will showcase how these students utilised this strategy to enhance their learning experiences.

9.3.2 Improvement through integration

The literature (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006) suggests that international students’ integration into a wider UK community influences their psychological and sociocultural adjustment. The research further confirms this, demonstrating that international students’ levels of integration into their community of learning contribute to differences in their perceptions of language improvement, cultural understanding, sense of belonging and satisfaction with their learning experiences.

As argued by Wenger (2000), learning takes place through social interactions in a community of learning, where novice learners learn, first through legitimate peripheral participation and later, full participation in activities. The community of learning in this research context refers to places which participants mentioned as having affected their learning and coping, including outside as well inside their classrooms. For example, for Wei this included social media and the gym (8.4.4; 8.5.5); for Ting, this included the restaurant where she reported learning English (6.4.5). The extent of students’ use of a community of learning distinguished them as integrated versus isolated, which also corresponded to their satisfaction with their learning experiences, as illustrated in Table 9.4 below.

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Table 9.4: Students’ integration and satisfaction with their learning experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Evidence of Interactions</th>
<th>Zihao</th>
<th>Ting</th>
<th>Wei</th>
<th>Dan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-class behaviour</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active engagement with teachers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with Chinese</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with other nationalities</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(including home students)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outside class behaviour</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent discussions with teachers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with learning support tutors</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with Chinese</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with other nationalities</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(including home students)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning through other extracurricular activities on campus</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceptions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall sense of integration</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with learning experiences</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Legend: ‘✓’ ‘X’ and ‘?’ represent ‘Presence’, ‘Absence’ and ‘Uncertainty’ of evidence)

As all participants studied alongside their own compatriots, in-class discussions with their Chinese peers became inevitable. While students were also expected to learn through interactions with their teachers, the observation data indicate that only Wei achieved full participation (8.5.4). Zihao (5.3; 5.4) and Ting (6.3; 6.4.2) responded to the teachers when asked. In contrast, Dan seldom participated in teacher-led discussions (7.5).

Studying their subject areas alongside home students, both Zihao (5.3.3) and Dan (7.3.2; 7.4.1; 7.5.6) initially experienced isolation from home students. However, Zihao exhibited a pattern of legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 2000), from withdrawal to full participation over the two years, which appears to correspond to his changes towards his learning: from anticipation to disappointment and to appreciation. As one of the few international students studying Law, Zihao initially reported being
unable to participate in the seminar discussions due to the language barrier and his isolation from home students, which led to his withdrawal from interactions with them and turning to his Chinese compatriots for help at Level 5 (5.3.3). Nevertheless, he still reported enjoying the learning process, which featured problem-solution through discussion with peers and consultation with the teachers through an apparent peripheral participation (5.3). Zihao’s enthusiasm in learning his Law unit was dampened by his poor academic performance, leading to his low academic self-efficacy and temporary withdrawal in TB1 Level 6 (5.4.5). Through self-reflection and discussions with his teachers, he eventually regained his self-efficacy in improving via deep learning, which in turn motivated him to re-enter the community of in TB2, as evidenced by his willingness to discuss academic issues with home students as well as professionals (5.5).

Despite the fact that Dan enrolled on a course where UK students were in the majority, she isolated herself from home students and efficiently denied herself the opportunity to improve her language via social interaction. Her perceived difficulty in interacting with home students at Level 4 (7.3.2) continued to perplex her throughout Level 5 (7.4.1) and Level 6 (7.5.6), resulting in her partial withdrawal from social interaction. Likewise, her belief that her Chinese compatriots (7.3.2), teachers (7.4.2) and extra-curricular activities (7.5.6) offered no opportunity for learning led to her further isolation from them, turning herself into an outsider of the learning community.

Previous literature (Brown, 2009) suggests that Chinese international students may be reduced to cultural and linguistic ghettoization by staying with their own compatriots while studying in the UK, thus losing the opportunities to improve their language skills. This study demonstrates that if Chinese international students can utilise the opportunities for integration, ghettoization can be largely avoided. Indeed, although Wei and Ting studied alongside mainly Chinese compatriots, both also achieved integration in the community of learning through various other means. While Ting mainly sought help mainly from more able Chinese peers (6.3), and sometimes teachers (6.4.3), she also improved her English via experiential learning (6.4.4). The flexibility in utilising the support available brought her satisfaction regarding her learning, allowing her to experience autonomy, support and a sense of belonging from her community of learning (6.4.9).

Wei appears to have been the most actively engaged in the learning community. By interacting with home students through social media and in the gym (8.4.4), and by making full use of opportunities to discuss issues with the LST and subject teachers (8.4.3; 8.5.4), he improved his learning and achieved cultural integration.

What is clear is that integration rather than isolation was a productive strategy in international students’ positive learning experiences. This might be compared to seeking social support, characteristic of an adaptive coping strategy. Participants’ differences in academic coping took them to a variety of learning
paths, with a variety of learning outcomes. The next section will present the changes over their course of study.

9.4 What were the results of their coping strategies?

9.4.1 Comparing their learning outcomes

The students in this study came to the UK to obtain a degree that they could not have obtained in China due to their poor academic performance (5.2; 6.2; 7.2; 8.2). Their difference in academic coping, however, led to very different learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are defined as “the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that students have and take with them when they successfully complete a course or program” (Suskie, 2009, p.23). Based on this definition, this research explored not only the knowledge and skills students gained, but also their changes in beliefs in their abilities to improve, and also in their approaches to learning.

Students’ academic achievement can be measured by the assessment marks and the degrees they obtained based on. On the surface, all participants made significant improvement in their academic performance through their study in the UK, as indicated by the marks and the degrees they obtained (Table 9.5).

Table 9.5: A comparison of students’ learning outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
<th>Level 6</th>
<th>Overall Weighted Average Mark</th>
<th>Honours Awarded</th>
<th>Sense of Belonging</th>
<th>Sense of Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zihao</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>Approx. 40%</td>
<td>Approx. 50%</td>
<td>50% ≤ M ≤ 59%</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ting</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>40-50%</td>
<td>50-60%</td>
<td>50% ≤ M ≤ 59%</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>40-50%</td>
<td>Mainly 50%</td>
<td>Mainly 60%</td>
<td>60% ≤ M ≤ 69%</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>40-60%</td>
<td>Mainly 60%</td>
<td>Mainly 70%</td>
<td>M ≥ 70%</td>
<td>First Class</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: N.A. indicates direct entry to Level 5)

Although the degrees that students are awarded with are often used to measure UK university students’ learning outcomes, they may not always reflect the overall quality of their learning. This is because degree classifications are based on marks that can be obtained via many routes other than learning, for example, academic game-playing and cheating. Furthermore, there are limitations to comparing outcomes of different courses due to variations in assessments, marking practices and the means of classifying the grades. A comparison between Zihao and Dan exemplifies this point. Zihao obtained a
2.2 degree, but Dan obtained a 2.1 degree. When put into context, the differences are clear: Over 80% of students from Dan’s degree obtained a 2.1 degree in 2014, a much higher percentage of students than in other degrees. Therefore, although they can be used to measure individual students’ changes in academic attainment across time, degree marks alone may not be accurate in measuring the learning outcomes.

Participants’ positive feelings about learning outcomes appeared to have been associated with their adoption of deep learning in their learning process and is worth further exploration here. The revised Bloom’s Taxonomy consists of six major categories of the cognitive process dimension following the degree of complexity: remember—understand—apply—analyse—evaluate—create (Krathwohl, 2014). Remembering, or retrieving the knowledge learned from memory, is a low level of learning, and is discouraged as it represents surface learning. The other dimensions in the hierarchical structure represent deep learning and are encouraged in education (Entwistle & McCune, 2004).

9.4.2 Interpreting their learning outcomes

The contrast in the participants’ learning outcomes becomes clearer when their approaches to learning are considered. Zihao, Ting and Wei succeeded in transitioning from surface learning to deep learning, as evidenced by their understanding of the necessity to construct knowledge through discussions with peers and professionals, learning through understanding rather than mechanical memorisation, to use adaptive strategies in combination with effort and to be self-regulated in their learning, and to experience a sense of belonging and satisfaction (5.5; 6.4; 8.5). This approach led to reported enjoyment of the learning process. By contrast, Dan did not seem to have progressed beyond remembering in most cases (surface learning). Although there was evidence of her passing the examinations through understanding (strategic learning), such effort did not appear to be consistent. Consistent surface learning approaches left Dan with constant helpless feelings (7.4.3; 7.5.3).

The current research indicates that while the quantifiable aspect of learning (marks and degrees) led to a fulfilment of goals (social and academic), it is the unquantifiable elements (i.e., sense of belonging and orientations towards deep learning) that led to their sense of satisfaction towards their learning experiences. Whereas Zihao, Ting and Wei eventually gained a sense of belonging and appreciation for deep learning, Dan was apparently unable to experience these. The reason why there should have been such differences is further explored in the final research question.

9.5 What factors contributed to the adoption of certain academic coping strategies?

The qualitative methods adopted in this study allowed for identifying the causes for Chinese international students’ adoption of coping strategies. This section synthesizes how the three interactive
elements—environmental, individual and cultural, contributed to their coping behaviour, which led to their different learning outcomes.

9.5.1 The influence from the learning environment

The research data identified the key factors in the teaching and learning environment that impacted students’ goal pursuits, leading to differences in coping, in approaches to learning and in the learning outcomes. Crucial factors enabling or constraining their transition to the UK environment included teaching, the tasks and the assessment.

UK assessment plays a significant role in Chinese international students’ changes in their conceptions of learning. Because the focus of the examinations is on testing students’ holistic knowledge based on their understanding, unlike the system the students are familiar with in China, participants made adjustments in their preparations for the examinations. Likewise, formative assessment through essay writing facilitated their deep learning process. Formative essay assessments provided opportunities for these students to address their problems based on teacher feedback.

An analysis of the participants’ level of understanding indicates that guidance from teachers and LSTs appears to have been the catalyst for Chinese international students’ transition to a learning goal. With professional support, both Zihao and Wei were able to not only use deep learning strategies (i.e., organised effort, reading extensively for understanding, connecting, synthesizing and evaluating ideas), but demonstrate their ability to use proactive knowledge to derive meaning from their courses and become academically resilient (5.5; 8.5). By contrast, seeking little professional help except when she was approaching the end of her course, Ting appeared to have developed unevenly across different units regarding deep learning. She appeared to have employed more strategic than deep learning approaches at times (6.4.7; 6.4.8), and did not appear to have enjoyed ‘the flow feeling’ (6.4.7), or ‘the feeling tone’ (McCune & Entwistle, 2011) that Wei experienced (8.5.4) by the end of the learning journey.

Seeking little professional support despite her constant experience of helplessness (7.4.3; 7.5.3), Dan appeared to be mainly focused on possessive knowledge in the learning process. While she did manage to acquire performative knowledge to pass the examinations through understanding, a holistic picture of the inter-connections between different units was clearly lacking in her learning. Acquiring isolated bits of knowledge did not allow for the growth of intrinsic motivation, nor academic self-efficacy, which renders her vulnerable to future challenges. Thus, although Dan was able to complete her degree, what she was lacking in was the thinking position in personal growth.

Table 9.6 below summarises students’ development in relation to their seeking support from their subject teachers and LSTs. With professional support, Zihao, Ting and Wei made changes so that they were able to experience an adaptive cycle of ‘a growth mindset, stronger self-efficacy, adaptive coping strategies, deep learning, and better learning outcomes’. By contrast, seldom seeking support from
professionals, Dan experienced few fundamental changes and a vicious cycle of ‘a fixed mindset, weak self-efficacy, maladaptive coping strategies, surface learning, and few changes in learning outcomes’.

Table 9.6 Students’ seeking help from professionals affecting changes in goal pursuits, learning orientations and academic self-efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change Name</th>
<th>Seeking out Professional Help</th>
<th>Goal Pursuits</th>
<th>Approaches to Learning</th>
<th>Academic Self-efficacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zihao</td>
<td>Sought out help from LSP and teachers from Level 6</td>
<td>Changed from a performance goal to a learning goal at Level 6</td>
<td>Changed from surface learning to deep learning at Level 6</td>
<td>Changed from low to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ting</td>
<td>Sought help from teachers at Level 6</td>
<td>Mainly pursued a learning goal</td>
<td>Combined deep with strategic learning</td>
<td>Remained high in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>Sought help from LST and teachers from Level 4</td>
<td>Mainly pursued a learning goal</td>
<td>Changed from surface to deep learning</td>
<td>Changed from low to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Sought help from LST before assessments; Rarely sought teacher help until end of her course</td>
<td>Consistently pursued a performance goal</td>
<td>Adopted a predominant surface approach to learning</td>
<td>Remained low in general</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, the frequency and duration of participants’ seeking professional help impacted their goal pursuits, deep learning and academic self-efficacy. By utilising the LSTs from an early stage and with consistency, Wei achieved transformation. A sharp contrast is Dan. As illustrated previously (7.4.3; 7.5.3), due to an apparently fixed mindset she consistently held, Dan chose self-protection to avoid exposing her vulnerabilities to others, including the professionals, thus limiting her opportunities for improvement.

In comparison, Ting’s help-seeking from professionals appears to have been sporadic until the final year. Her understanding of developing essay argument through frequent discussions with the Project tutor (6.4.7) suggests that she could have achieved better learning outcomes if she had used this strategy earlier and with greater frequency. Likewise, Zihao’s successful transition to deep learning was not complete until Level 6. Nevertheless, his satisfaction with having acquired the ability to learn through
understanding and to use the transferable skills in the future by the end of his study (5.5.5) suggests that facilitating students to form the disposition to understand for themselves and for the future is useful even at the late stage of learning. This is because, once students have reached “their own, personally satisfying, and flexible forms of understanding” (McCune & Entwistle, 2011, p.304), they associate the learning processes not only with higher motivation, but also with thinking dispositions that combines deep learning, strategy use and a feeling tone or a positive attitude towards challenges in new situations.

Although a supportive learning environment was conducive to the development of Zihao, Ting and Wei, as presented by individual case studies (Chapters 5, 6, 8), the few benefits that Dan obtained from a similar environment (Chapter 7) also indicate the significant role of the individuals in the learning. It is their self-efficacy and mindsets that influenced how they interacted with, and co-created their learning environment, a process that will be discussed next.

9.5.2 The growth mindset as the underlying cause for changes

As well as examining the changes that are quantifiable in terms of grade development, this longitudinal qualitative study has identified students’ mindsets and their self-efficacy as the most significant factors that contributed to differences in their coping strategies and their learning outcomes. This section discusses how students’ mindsets and their self-efficacy changed in the learning process.

9.5.2.1 Mindsets and academic self-efficacy

Students’ mindset beliefs (Dweck, 2006) and their academic self-efficacy (Schunk & Pajares, 2001) contribute to their academic motivation. According to the entity theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck, 2000; Hong et al., 1999), students with the growth mindset can focus on learning goals, persevere and bounce back because of their sustained belief in the possibility of change through more adaptive strategies. In contrast, students with the fixed mindset focus on performance goals and prefer to use problem-avoidance coping strategies to hide their vulnerability, and easily give up once they encounter difficulties. Self-efficacy theory holds that as the very force that motivates people to attain their goals, self-efficacy is also a sustaining force for students to persevere when confronted with challenges (Bandura et al., 1996; Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 2003).

Following the entity theory, people with either the growth or fixed mindset may show similar motivation when their perceived self-efficacy is high, but differ dramatically when their perceived self-efficacy is low (Dweck & Legget, 1988). This study provides further evidence by analysing participants’ different reactions to negative feedback and the remediation they took. Because setbacks were associated with not only fear of failure but also lack of fulfilment of their social goals, students with both mindsets suffered, to the extent that they also displayed temporary loss of self-efficacy when they felt that they did not have adequate strategies to cope. However, holding more of a growth mindset, Zihao, Wei and Ting were able to seek opportunities to improve themselves and eventually recovered themselves by
seeking actively adaptive coping strategies. By contrast, holding more of a fixed mindset left Dan avoiding her problems by resorting to negative emotion coping strategies. Since these strategies did not solve her problems, she tended to become less efficacious when encountering difficulties, and experience resource-depletion, a phenomenon discussed extensively by Job et al. (2010), which led to her dysfunctional coping strategies (Chapter 7).

Similarly, a growth mindset contributed to high self-efficacy in academic self-regulation whereas the fixed mindset contributed to low self-efficacy in academic self-regulation, a finding that supports previous literature (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). Holding an apparent growth mindset, Zihao, Wei and Ting demonstrated self-efficacy to regulate their learning through more effort and better strategies, which helped them to further improve their academic self-efficacy. In contrast, with an apparent fixed mindset, Dan displayed low self-efficacy in self-regulation. With this leading to little effort in solving problems, she demonstrated consistent signs of dysfunctional coping and experienced dissatisfaction with her learning.

Table 9.7 below summarizes the general tendency of students’ mindset and self-efficacy in relation to their coping strategies and satisfaction with their learning. There appears to be a positive relationship between students’ mindsets and self-efficacy, which corresponds to their strategy use and satisfaction with their learning. However, this does not suggest that a growth mindset always leads to high self-efficacy and a negative mindset always leads to low self-efficacy. Indeed, evidence from this study suggests that although students’ mindsets were relatively stable, the fact that even those with the growth mindset also resorted to dysfunctional strategies at times indicates dynamism in the behaviours related to mindsets, a finding that has been noted in other recent work (Mercer, 2011).

Table 9.7: Relationship between mindsets, academic self-efficacy and learning outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Apparent Mindset</th>
<th>Academic Self-efficacy</th>
<th>Strategy Use</th>
<th>Satisfaction with Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zihao</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>From low to high</td>
<td>Sometimes maladaptive, but generally adaptive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ting</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Generally high</td>
<td>Occasionally maladaptive, but generally adaptive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>From low to high</td>
<td>From maladaptive to adaptive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Fixed</td>
<td>Consistently low</td>
<td>Mainly maladaptive</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Moreover, although a reasonably high self-efficacy contributed to adaptive coping strategies, this does not suggest that the higher one’s self-efficacy, the better the learning outcomes. Indeed, as argued in Zihao’s case, over-rated self-efficacy at Level 5 led to his neglect of the academic issues; a lowered self-efficacy in combination with his growth mindset at Level 6 (5.4.6) motivated him to seek better strategies to improve his learning. With relatively low self-efficacy but also holding a growth mindset allowed Wei to adopt ‘defensive pessimism’ (8.5.3), leading to his consistently investing effort and improving strategies. However, constant low self-efficacy rendered Dan helpless in improving her language (7.4.3; 7.5.3). A more debilitating result could be that she was likely to have generated to other areas of her learning, as evidenced by her difficulty in integration (7.5.6). Therefore, a growth mindset appears to be the key in sustaining students’ motivation to learn, which is consistent with other research (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007).

9.5.2.2 A growth mindset leading to positive coping

The students in this study largely followed the pattern of learning indicated by the existing literature which demonstrates that learners with different mindsets (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) took different learning paths. As discussed earlier (9.3), although those with a growth mindset explored here did adopt problem-avoidance coping at various stages, this seemed to be due to their lack of appropriate learning strategy at that time. Their fundamental belief in the malleability of their ability to effect changes through effort provided the incentives for Zihao, Ting and Wei to meet their challenges by seeking out new strategies (e.g. via help seeking) and to adopt problem-focused coping strategies (5.5; 6.3; 8.4; 8.5).

By organising time, self-reflecting, positive restructuring, and more importantly, seeking opportunities to participate in the learning community comprising of teachers as well as peers, they were able to make the transition from pursuing performance goals to pursuing a combination of learning and performance goals. This led to increasingly positive learning outcomes, which gave them further confidence in their approach and reinforced their belief in their ability to develop. Their improved academic self-efficacy facilitated adaptive coping, leading to positive learning outcomes (5.5; 6.4; 8.5).

Dan (Chapter 7), in contrast, who showed a fixed mindset from the outset, did not believe that her effort could change her learning outcomes nor did she believe her own ability to develop her self-regulation. As a result, she focussed on performance goals rather than learning goals. She cared about achieving good marks but was not focussed on learning as a route to performance. Furthermore, she employed many strategies to protect herself from the negative emotions related to challenge and poor performance, strategies, which, in fact, handicapped her learning. Since none of the recurring pattern of her avoidance coping discussed above led to improved academic outcomes, Dan became increasingly helpless in her approach to learning (avoiding challenges, avoiding the learning community, focusing only on what she could already do, and reducing her expectations for herself), leaving the mismatch between her expectations and those of the University’s unresolved. Moreover, due to her ‘judgement goals’: the
tendency to measure and evaluate an external attribute based on limited evidence, almost certainly because of her fixed mindset (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), she gained little from peer learning. Likewise, her pursuit of performance-avoidance goals whenever she was faced with setbacks (e.g., negative essay feedback) meant that she did not benefit from teacher feedback, further reducing her opportunities for self-improvement. These maladaptive coping strategies left her with feelings of disintegration and dissatisfaction.

9.5.2.3 A growth mindset contributing to the use of teacher feedback

Teacher feedback has long been considered to be one of the most influences in students’ learning; however, its effectiveness is lost unless students learn to respond to it (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Price et al., 2010). Shute (2008, p.175) contends that three conditions need to be met for feedback to be effective and useful for students: (1) motive (the student needs it), (2) opportunity (the student receives it in time to use it) and (3) means (the student is able and willing to use it). The findings from this study support these conditions. This study suggests that, in contrast to students with the fixed mindset, students with the growth mindset are more likely to focus on teacher feedback. Wei demonstrated consistency in seeking teacher feedback, from which he addressed his essay problems at Level 4 (8.3.2; 8.5.3). It was likely that the strong learning goal that he developed from an early stage allowed him time and energy to seek opportunities for improvement.

Wei, Zihao and Ting reported initially paying attention to their essay feedback only when they were given the opportunity to address their problems before the final submission, whereby they could improve their grades (5.5.1; 6.4.7). The fact that even students with the growth mindset did not fully utilise teacher feedback unless it was related to their academic achievement indicates the strong influence of social goals on Chinese international students’ pursuit of a performance goal, which will be further discussed later.

In contrast to Wei, Zihao and Ting, Dan did not appear to utilise, let alone benefit from teacher feedback because of an apparent fixed mindset. Focusing on performance goals, she hid away her issues from others, thus losing the opportunities to understand and solve her academic problems (7.5.3). This echoes the argument by Shute (2008), that students’ use of feedback can be subject to their willingness to use it. In this research context, students’ willingness to address their problems based on feedback appears to be mediated by a growth mindset, a conclusion that has been discussed in previous literature (Hong et al., 1999; Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). A growth mindset also appears to have been indispensable for international students’ integration.

9.5.2.4 A growth mindset contributing to international Chinese students’ effort to integrate

This study identifies mindsets as a significant factor in international students’ integration into the community of learning. Wenger (2000) argues that learning involves a “two-way relationship between
people and the social learning systems in which they participate” (p.227). Studying in an English culture, all participants experienced the boundaries between different language communities. Embracing an apparent growth mindset, Wei, Ting and Zihao appeared to have learned to adjust themselves, appreciate the cultural differences and gradually seek opportunities to interact with students from other nationalities and the University academic staff to improve themselves (9.3.2), whereby achieving belonging, integration and satisfaction.

The study suggests that students with a fixed mindset are unable to join in the learning community, which leads to feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction. Demonstrating a strong inclination towards a fixed mindset, Dan not only did not believe in her ability to change her own personal traits (e.g., low self-regulation). She also held ‘judgement goals’ (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) regarding cultural integration, based on only a few incidents that communication was impossible due to differences in culture and language (7.5.6). Her behaviour supports the entity theory (Plaks, Stroessner, Dweck, & Sherman, 2001), which argues that people with a fixed mindset in contrast to those with a growth mindset are more likely to form stereotypes. Whereas people holding the growth mindset believe that human attributes are changeable and, therefore, tend to be open to understanding others’ behaviour, those holding a fixed mindset believe that human attributes are fixed, and therefore, tend to understand people in terms of these traits.

The students’ changes through the cycle of beliefs—behaviour—outcomes during their cross-cultural education suggest that their mindsets played a key role in demarcating their learning outcomes. Besides their individual and educational factors, certain influences of Chinese culture and values also contributed to their learning outcomes via their conceptions of learning, their social goals and their beliefs in the means to achieve these goals. Students’ approaches to learning have been covered previously (9.2.3), I will only focus on the impact on their cultural beliefs in effort and their endorsement of social goals in their goal pursuits.

9.5.3 The influence of Chinese culture

Previous literature has argued that Chinese cultural values and beliefs help shape students’ academic learning during their stay in English-speaking countries (3.5.3). Chinese cultural influences in the forms of social goals (3.5.3) and effort attribution (2.2.5) are evident in this research.

9.5.3.1 The belief in effort

As discussed previously (2.2), Chinese students are likely to hold effort attribution beliefs—attributing their success or failure to effort due to their socialisation (Hau & Ho, 2008; Lau & Lee, 2008). The findings from this study also suggest that a unique cultural belief in effort, which is much in line with Dweck’s growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), was also a shared feature by Zihao, Ting and Wei. Zihao reported continuing to employ effort as a strategy to improve his marks in the UK (5.3.4; 5.5.2). Inspired
by her father’s words that she should succeed through effort, Ting remained optimistic when she encountered academic challenges and persevered through efforts (6.3.2; 6.3.3). With a strong belief in effort, Wei quickly recovered from his negative emotions under the influence of successful stories from his hardworking parents and townsfolk (8.3.2; 8.4.2; 8.4.3; 8.5.4).

Participants’ belief in effort appear to have been strengthened with their adoption of deep learning, when they began to combine effort with strategy use rather than invest in sheer effort in surface learning. This is supported by Zihao’s self-report of investing more time and energy in understanding, analysing, synthesizing and relating ideas after discussing his problems with the teachers at Level 6 (5.5.5), Ting’s satisfaction at working diligently to improve her essays under the Project teacher’s instruction at Level 6 (6.4.7), and Wei’s enjoyment in constant improvement through extensive reading and consultation with teachers (8.5.3).

Effort attributions were clearly absent from Dan’s belief for coping, and prevented her from utilising the support available or making extra effort to improve her learning (7.3; 7.4; 7.5). It is not possible to ascertain from the current data whether Dan, who came from an affluent middle class family, coming from an affluent middle class Chinese family and holding an apparent fixed mindset, had been influenced by the changes in traditional values in Chinese society. With education as a means to upward social mobility “becoming increasingly skewed by the triumph of these new money-driven values and practices” (Rosen, 2004, p. 49), education in China has become “a materialist ‘commodity for consumption, commercialization, class segregation and distinction for the wealthy families” (Tsang, 2013, p.665). Under this influence, effort attribution belief, commonly regarded as a key feature of Chinese students as a cultural group (2.6), may be losing its explanatory power for individual Chinese students’ learning behaviour.

9.5.3.2 The influence of social goals

This study suggests that Chinese students pursue social goals in addition to achievement goals during their undergraduate study. However, there are individual variations in terms of the impact of social goals, suggesting that a small culture view is needed in discussing social goals held by Chinese students.

As discussed in 3.5.3, controversies exist over the impact of social goals on Chinese students’ education, with some arguing that the strong pressure associated with social goals to satisfy their families’ expectations push Chinese students towards performance goals featuring surface learning (Chang & Wong, 2008), and others arguing that their social goals can actually motivate them to face the challenges and persevere (Ho et al., 2008; Tao & Hong, 2014). Both influences have been found in this study. Their strong identification with their social goals to obtain a UK university degree and to satisfy their parents’ expectations also creates academic pressure and fear of failure during the learning process. These lead to different coping patterns depending on students’ mindsets and self-efficacy.
Zihao’s fear of failure to pass his Law units initially left him dealing with his academic issues through emotion coping and surface learning (5.4.5). Eventually, however, fear of failure led to self-reflection and consultations with the teachers. With better coping strategies and hence improved self-efficacy, he reported more self-regulation towards deep learning (5.5). Wei’s fear of failure in the assessment and not being able to meet his parents’ expectations left him feeling helpless in TB1, Level 4 (8.3.1). This led to his seeking help from teachers and peers to improve his learning (8.4.3; 8.4.4). Despite his continual progress, his strong belief in effort combined with his fear for failure resulted in his employing defensive pessimism (Norem, 2008), which meant he continued striving hard to improve through strategy and effort (8.5.3). Likewise, although Ting appeared to be self-efficacious in self-regulated learning from the start, fear of failure was still evident in her learning process. Driven by fear of failure, she adopted some dysfunctional strategies such as self-protection when receiving a low mark at Level 5 (6.3) and buying an essay to pass the assessment at Level 6 for lack of better coping strategies (6.4.8).

Dan also held social goals; however, because her perceptions of the mismatch between these and the University’s, her internalised social goals resulted in her pursuing performance-oriented goals, with little intrinsic motivation to achieve them. Unsurprisingly, this seems to have been the cause of her surface learning strategy. Her culturally influenced focus on performance goals, combined with her apparently fixed mindset means that she continued her learning journey with a helpless orientation. Without seeking new learning strategies for learning and with a preoccupation with performing via other means and using self-protection strategies (for example avoidance, blaming of others, cheating) when the desired performance was not achieved (7.3.2; 7.4.3; 7.5.3), she was experiencing a constant fear of failure and low academic self-efficacy.

Dan’s academic achievement despite a fixed mindset and avoidance coping may appear to contradict the previous literature argument (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001; Daron et al., 2007) that performance-avoidance goal pursuits are generally detrimental to performance. One explanation could be the interference of social goals, which helped motivate Dan to work towards achievement goals. As the negative effects of avoidance goals can be compensated by performance-approach goal pursuits (Daron et al., 2007), Dan’s social goals might, at certain stages, have helped cancel the negativity caused by avoidance goals, as seen in her use of strategic approaches to achieve high marks in the examinations (7.5.4) to avoid putting her social goals at risk. The fact that Dan would stop making an effort once she completed the task at hand, or when she encountered future difficulties, also suggests that pursuing social goals and performance goals also frustrate students with the fixed mindset from making further progress. The development of Zihao, Wei and Ting, by contrast, suggests that the internationalisation of their social goals can help students with a growth mindset to turn their fear into motivation eventually because of their belief in effort and are, therefore, more likely to engage in searching for alternative strategies when the existing ones do not work. Conversely, fear of failure
caused by their social goals is detrimental to those with the fixed mindset. Because these students do not believe in changes in effort and tend to give up easily (Dweck, 2006), fear of failure can lead them to adopt avoidance-coping and surface learning, as also found in other literature (Chang & Wong, 2008; Liem, et al., 2008).

9.6 Building a framework

Based on the research findings, Chinese international students’ learning outcomes appear to be dependent on three interactive factors (Figure 3): The individual; the cultural values and the educational factors. The key individual factors include students’ mindsets, self-efficacy and English language competence; the key cultural values include the Chinese education culture and conceptions of learning (such as teacher-student relationship, what learning is about and how to achieve it), and the key educational factors include teacher feedback, assessment, workload, and institutional intervention and support.

This model builds on the interactive coping approach proposed by Chun, Moos and Cronkite (2006) and Bigg’s ‘3P’ Model of teaching and learning (Biggs, et al., 2001), but it also emphasizes the significance of the three elements, the individual, culture and educational environment in shaping students’ learning outcomes. This construction may help address the problems of overemphasis of the role of culture in Chun, Moos and Cronkite’s coping approach and the understatement of its role in Bigg’s ‘3P’ model.

Figure 3: Factors influencing Chinese students’ academic coping and learning outcomes

Legend to the circles of learning outcomes:
1 – Academic Achievement
2 – Coping Strategies
3 – Goals
The learning outcomes are the centrepiece of teaching and learning cycle in this model. This is because students’ learning outcomes should consider not only the measurable academic achievement, but also students’ learning approaches, their sense of integration and their satisfaction with their learning experiences as individuals. Mindsets, as an important personal factor contributing to students’ learning, are also highlighted. Sufficient evidence from this research supports the idea that with a growth mindset, improved self-efficacy and better language competence, students can combine their cultural values in education and beliefs in effort to improve their ability through deep learning. Their adaptive coping strategies, including utilising every learning opportunity offered by the University (teacher feedback and academic support) to improve their learning, investing organised effort, staying positive and persevering after setbacks also bring with them positive learning outcomes. These positive outcomes in turn help improve their academic self-efficacy in learning, modify or change their conceptions of learning to match the educational requirements by UK HE. These changes lead to the appreciation of the learning process and resilience to future challenges.

Conversely, students with a fixed mindset are often associated with low self-efficacy in self-regulation and academic studies. When they encounter academic challenges, which are bound to be during the learning process, they tend to give up easily. Furthermore, students with a fixed mindset also tend to form judgement goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) and become reluctant to accept teacher feedback, thus significantly reducing the opportunity for self-improvement. Consequently, their cross-cultural education may leave students with more of a fixed mindset inclination less dissatisfied, less integrated, low-efficacious and are thus more vulnerable to any future challenges.

Compared with the framework by Chun, Moos and Cronkite (2006), which sees culture as an overarching element in Chinese people’s coping, the proposed framework sees culture as an important contributing factor in individual students’ coping. Data from this research suggest that Chinese students’ past education can socialise them with beliefs/disbeliefs in effort, which further influence their mindsets, hence the single arrow between cultural and individual factors. Likewise, contextual factors in their new learning environment can impact individuals’ mindset, self-efficacy and language competence (9.5.1), hence the single arrow between UK HE and individual factors.

The double arrows in Figure 3 indicate the bi-directional relationships between the learning outcomes and the individual, cultural and educational factors. Biggs (2003) has reasoned for constructive alignment between the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and all the components in the teaching system, including the curriculum, teaching methods and assessment. He stresses that “the ILOs cannot sensibly be stated in terms of marks obtained” and that “intended outcomes refer to sought-for qualities of performance” (Biggs, 2003, p.3). To achieve the alignment between the educational factors and the learning outcomes, the focus of education should be on students’ ability to understand and to apply the knowledge they have learned. However, as the study suggests, despite the efforts of the educational
environment, students consistently holding a fixed mindset appear to have been largely unaffected, which points out that more efforts are urgently needed to achieve a bidirectional relationship.

9.7 Conclusion

Chinese international students’ major academic challenges were similar, and they were related to their language, integration and essay writing. How they coped with these challenges and the results of their coping varied. A ‘small culture’ approach has allowed the detailed exploration into four individual Chinese learning experiences, providing further evidence that neither the rote-learning depicted in the deficit model nor the hard-working depicted in the surplus model is sufficient to explain the complexities of the learning process of individual Chinese students. Their culture of learning acquired from their early socialisations interacted with their individual beliefs and with the contextual information from the learning environment, leading to variations in their coping behaviour and learning outcomes.
Chapter 10 Final discussion

10.1 Introduction

This research explored the interplay between individual, cultural and educational factors that shaped Chinese undergraduate students’ academic learning outcomes, which forms the basis for a comprehensive framework to interpret students’ learning experiences. A longitudinal qualitative research such as this can contribute to the understanding of the Chinese students studying in the West. However, there are also some constraints with this study. This chapter will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the study and also provide recommendations for UK universities. It will end with a personal reflection on my own learning journey as a Chinese international student in UK HE, which formed an integral part of the research process.

10.2 Contributions of the research

The longitudinal qualitative study allows for rich exploration into the development of individual students’ conceptions of learning and, how their coping strategies and approaches to learning evolved or remained unchanged over the period of their tuition. It identifies that international students’ learning outcomes (their academic achievement, their sense of integration and satisfaction) that are affected by various individual factors, such as mindsets and self-efficacy, as well as by their culture and the immediate teaching and learning environment in the UK. Several important findings may help contribute to the academic literature concerning cross-cultural communication and education.

10.2.1 Methodological contributions

As far as I am aware, this is one of the few longitudinal studies focusing on international students’ approaches to learning and learning strategies through prolonged engagement in data collection. Although there has been much research exploring international students’ cultural adjustment in English-speaking countries (Andrade, 2006; Major, 2005; Trice, 2007), students’ learning approaches (Durkin, 2008; Kember, 2000; Vermunt & Verrmetten, 2004), students’ mindsets in learning (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck, 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2012) and students’ academic self-efficacy in motivation and learning (Liem et al., 2008; Pajares, 2002; Putwain, et al., 2013; Schunk & Pajares, 2001), very little research has integrated these perspectives into a single framework that explores international students’ learning.

The rich data collected via multiple methods such as observations, interviews, and many informal talks have enabled a rich exploration into students’ academic learning process made “validity, meaningfulness and insights” (Patton, 2002) possible. Stretching the interviews across several stages allowed for in-depth analysis of the subtle development of individual students’ beliefs at different stages, which would have been difficult to achieve via quantitative research methods such as questionnaires.
and surveys, or short-term interviews. The observations and informal talks also helped avoid taking learners’ accounts (via interviews) at face value. For example, based on her interviews and academic transcripts alone, Dan could have led to the conclusion of academic progress and eventual acceptance of UK Higher Education. However, triangulations through observations led to further exploration of the underlying causes for her dissatisfaction and lack of fundamental changes over the years.

10.2.2 Theoretical contributions

International Chinese students’ learning experience has been studied extensively and most of the research has discussed their academic challenges as well as their cultural integration (Ho et al., 2008). This study has been the first to associate international students’ learning experience, their cultural integration and conceptions of learning with their mindsets and self-efficacy beliefs. Students with more of a growth mindset inclination, in contrast to students with more of a fixed mindset inclination, are able to make positive changes in their academic self-efficacy and goal pursuits, leading to more flexible coping strategies, deep approaches to learning, and improvement in academic learning outcomes and cultural integration.

The findings support the previous literature (Chen & Wong, 2015; Ho et al., 2008), which argues that ability-proving through high marks (a performance goal and a social goal) and personal improvement through effort and strategies (a learning goal) can work symbiotically rather than separately for students from collectivistic cultures. It appears that theories regarding achievement goals, originally based on Western student population, are insufficient to interpret the learning behaviour of students from some Eastern cultures, a point that has been argued elsewhere (King, McInerney, & Watkins, 2012). The findings indicate that individual Chinese students may adopt differing coping strategies despite their strong endorsement of social goals depending on the interplay between their mindsets and self-efficacy. Interestingly, even those holding consistently more of a growth mindset may temporarily adopt dysfunctional strategies such as procrastinating or cheating because of low academic self-efficacy and high fear of failure within their limited university time. This finding extends the original literature (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), which holds that a growth mindset is associated with adaptive coping strategies.

Finally, the research helps clarify the role of culture in Chinese international students’ transcultural education. While Chinese values and beliefs certainly influenced their learning behaviour, such influences are not definite. Students adopting more of a growth mindset are more likely to absorb a new culture of learning, while retaining the best of their cultural beliefs, for example, a strong belief in effort. This contrasts with students with more of a fixed mindset, who appear to be reluctant to adjust themselves to the new culture of learning, resulting in discrepancies of various kinds, which further leads to dissatisfaction.
10.3 Limitations of the research

Despite its many strengths, this research can be further improved in several aspects. The lessons drawn from it may provide directions for future studies.

Firstly, the single use of qualitative methods limited the number of participants, which in turn, also limits the application of the research findings. Future studies may consider using mixed methods. This is because, a larger number of participants with quantitative research can help generate rich findings regarding the core characteristics of Chinese students’ culture of learning. The combination with qualitative methods exploring individual variations, on the other hand, can help solve the problem of cultural essentialism inherent in a large culture view attributed to quantitative studies. As pointed out by Pilcher et al. (2011), there needs to be a combination of the two ‘hubs’ in studying Chinese students, one focusing on the ‘core’ characteristics of Chinese students as a group and the other on the variation of individuals. This is because, as they argue, “the idea of a common core may be criticized from the viewpoint of the second hub as an essentializing or reductionist conception, but stressing the hub of variation does necessarily mean an absence of some influence of core characteristics” (p.293). Accordingly, mixed methods may allow for insights into both hubs. This accords with a small culture view, allowing for identifying individual variations while also recognising any possible cultural influences in Chinese students’ learning.

Secondly, there might exist some bias in data collection. Although semi-structured interviews provide opportunities for deep understanding, bias may also arise due to the possibility that participants’ may have made “conscious and deliberate attempts to mislead the interviewer” (Diefenbach, 2009, p.881) when discussing sensitive issues such as academic plagiarism and cheating. Furthermore, some of the data gathered through participants’ recalling of the past might be inaccurate due to memory loss, as demonstrated by Dan’s vague memory of the details about her Level 4 learning experiences. However, consistent triangulation helped to maintain validity and vigour of the research, including class observations, academic transcripts, teacher feedback, repeated interviews, critically examining and analysing the data and more importantly, frequent discussing with supervisors and peers.

Thirdly, there are constraints with participant selection. Most participants participated in the research were from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences due to the limited number of Chinese students studying science-related courses at the University. Therefore, the findings from the present study cannot represent Chinese international students from the Science and other faculties, who were likely to have different learning experiences. Furthermore, the four chosen cases happened to have all internalised their social goals and successfully enrolled in a UK Master’s degree course. The research did not cover those who did not internalise their social goals, coped less well or even failed their courses.
It is worth mentioning that the study was conducted at a post-1992 UK university, where the English entry requirements (e.g., IELTS scores) tend to be lower than those required pre-1992. Since English as a second language affected the learning process, the findings may not be applicable to Chinese international students from other universities. Since qualitative case studies aim at ‘particularisation’ and ‘uniqueness’ rather than representativeness (Stake, 1995), the assertions were made about the four individuals, whose learning experiences differed but also shared some common core characteristics. Similarly, the gender differences revealed by this study were incidental rather than intentional. Indeed, some female participants who coped very well with their studies were excluded from this study as their data did not appear to fit in the overarching research questions. Still, as the study suggests, Chinese cultural belief that a woman has to be financially independent but does not have to exert herself (which both Ting’s and Dan’s fathers seemed to have supported) may affect the learning motivation of Chinese female students, a point worth future exploring.

The impact of cultural changes on Chinese students’ motivation to study is another area worth further study. For example, with the increasing accumulation of wealth among the rising Chinese middle class, there have been outcries about the second-generation kids from middle class who have failed gaokao, but who still manage to obtain their degrees from abroad through illegal means such as academic cheating and plagiarism (Brady & Dutta, 2012; Coughlan, 2008). Indeed, academic plagiarism occurred even with the small number of participants such as this study. How social changes interferes in students’ academic coping and learning can be an interesting topic.

10.4 Recommendations

Figure 3 indicates that the learning outcomes of Chinese international students can be attributed to the interactions between students’ individual, cultural and institutional factors. Students’ personal factors, in particular, their mindsets impacted the interactions. Students with a growth mindset in contrast to those with a fixed mindset tended to hold strong beliefs in changes, worked harder at improving their academic performance and integrating into the community of learning, and seeking help in the case of setbacks. As challenges are bound to arise in the learning process, helping international students to develop a growth mindset can be critical for students to achieve positive learning outcomes.

10.4.1 Making early diagnosis of the mindsets

Evidence from the previous literature suggests that interventions to develop a growth mindset among students have been successful in the US (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck et al., 2011). In the UK, the University of Portsmouth has also successfully intervened both school and college students via teacher training. Observable data suggest that students intervened become more engaged in learning, particularly in maths (Rienzo, Rolfe, & Wilkinson, 2015). We can only hypothesize that intervention programmes of this nature could be extended to university students.
Early diagnosis of students’ problems and intervention appears to be highly desirable. This is because the time they spend achieving their university transition can impact on students’ later progress—a conclusion drawn from the progress of the participants in this study. Unless they understand from the outset the expectations from UK HE, it may take a much longer time for students to develop their understanding, and some may not at all.

Findings from this study indicate that providing all information during the Induction Week may not always be effective. Too much information during a short period of time can create information overload for students who are still struggling with their language barrier and acquainting themselves with their new learning environment. Therefore, individual tutorials in combination with strategy training at an early stage would appear to be essential.

As it takes time for students to understand and change their preferred strategies to more adaptable ones, early diagnosis and interventions could start from the PSE course or the Induction. An intervention programme in an American college to increase the skills and tenacity in students motivated them to successfully complete their mathematics course (Silva & White, 2013). UK universities can likewise introduce contextualised training programmes to help international students to succeed. The current study has identified students’ generic skills for language learning, academic writing as well as specific skills for their subjects can be areas for interventions. Further research is also needed to customise methods suitable for different levels and different cultural groups.

10.4.2 Provide on-going strategy training

Early diagnosis and interventions are essential. However, university professional support should be conducted on an ongoing basis to sustain students’ motivation to use adaptive coping strategies such as self-reflections, self-diagnosis and help-seeking, and to adapt to specific subject-related strategies.

Dweck (2015) contends that people’s mindsets are not fixed; rather, they tend to move along the continuum of a fixed and a growth mindsets. For Chinese students who come from a system encouraging surface approaches, learning to adapt to deep approaches to learning can be key for their academic success. This study has demonstrated that whereas students with a fixed mindset tend to adopt performance goals and surface learning strategies, those with a growth mindset may not always employ deep learning approaches. This is due to the fact that it takes time for students, including those with a pre-existing growth mindset to explore and to adapt to new learning strategies. Where there is no obvious strategy to adopt and little professional guidance, even those with a potential for a growth mindset can revert to solely performance goals and surface strategies, as seen in Zihao and Wei’s negative emotion coping before their discussions with the teachers, and Ting’s cheating in one unit. Students “need to try new strategies and seek input from others when they’re stuck. They need this repertoire of approaches—not just sheer effort—to learn and improve” (Dweck, 2015, n.p.). Combining
mindset training with strategy training can increase students’ academic self-efficacy, reduce the use of malfunctioning strategies, avoid academic plagiarism, and enhance their satisfaction towards their learning.

10.4.3 Structuring university support as core not optional

The study reveals that whereas students with a well-developed growth mindset displayed flexible coping and were more willing to seek University support when they encountered difficulties, students with a fixed mindset tended to experience the most problems and the fewest coping strategies but were the least willing to seek help. By offering structured non-optional as well as optional activities, the University can maximize the opportunities for international students to receive support. For example, while encouraging international Chinese students to utilize professional support, teachers could change tutorials from a ‘come and see me if you need me’ model to a regular non-optional one involving one-to-one session. What the current data also indicates is the value of support from non-academic staff, with whom students with performance goals would not be fearful of displaying their weaknesses (lack of performance). The current LST role is acknowledged as of value in this instance, but again one must point to the obvious weakness of this: its optional nature.

The participants from this study seem to have made little use of other forms of university academic support other than those from their LSTs and their subject teachers. This may suggest a rather laid-back attitude by relevant agencies needs to be addressed to reach out a wider student population. A proactive attitude on the part of the University can be crucial for students who hold a fixed mindset inclination. Similar to students with low academic self-efficacy, who tend to be unwilling to seek academic help and become vulnerable to academic setbacks (Newman, 2002), students holding a fixed mindset are less likely to benefit from any kinds of support despite their strong identification of social goal and are therefore, likely to experience positive changes despite years of study in the UK.

10.4.4 Making feedback work

The impact of teacher feedback appears to have been an extremely powerful tool for Chinese international students to experience ‘epiphanies’ and make changes. Although providing feedback on students’ work has been consistent in the University, not all students consciously make use of teacher feedback. If students do not actually read their feedback to monitor and regulate the quality of their learning, then the value of feedback is lost. This raises concerns about the practical use of feedback in students’ learning, which has been extensively discussed in the literature (Maclellan, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

This study indicates that not only those with a fixed mindset tend to ignore their feedback, but even students with a growth mindset do not always attend to their feedback due to a lack of awareness of its significance in learning. Therefore, helping students to relate feedback to deep learning and learning
outcomes while providing strategy training may help narrow down the discrepancies between students’ expectations for high marks and the educational requirements for deep learning.

It appears that one-to-one tutorials can accelerate students’ understanding of deep learning and high marks (e.g., attention to feedback and improve). This may suggest that the University should consider ways to increase face-to-face opportunities for students. Supplementing or even replacing some of the written feedback with oral feedback in the form of individual tutorials, for example, could be made mandatory at least once a year. Also, lecturers/tutors may consider providing more formative feedback, with suggestions for further improvement, accompanied by only provisional marks or no marks at all, and then to give the final marks based on students’ reactions to the feedback. The study indicates that this strategy can help focus students’ attention to the value of feedback. The strategy has been used in some units, but this needs to be done with more consistency across all units in a university. Certainly, practicality needs to be considered as this can be time-consuming for academics, who may teach up to 18 hours a week in UK universities, in which case, UK universities may also consider utilising peer mentoring as a supplement to such professional supports.

10.4.5 Utilising peer mentoring and peer tutoring programmes

Some UK universities use ‘buddy’ schemes, to pay home students for helping new arrivals (both international and home students) to orient themselves around the campus (Edwards & Ran, 2006), which also applies to the University under study during the Induction Week. However, the case studies clearly indicate that due to academic challenges from the English language and the differences in the cultures of learning may render international students vulnerable during their cultural transition, who may need a longer period of support, than that offered during a brief Induction week. UK universities may consider introducing ‘peer mentoring’ and ‘peer tutoring’ programmes to support international students to facilitate their smooth transition.

Peer mentoring involves “a more experienced student helping a less experienced student improve overall academic performance, encourages mentors’ personal growth”, and peer tutoring, a more common form, “focuses on a more advanced student helping lower-level students with course content” (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p.122). Peer mentoring for more experienced students to help vulnerable students to succeed has been used an intervention in many universities in the US and Canada (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). The desirable effects from the mentoring role can be achieved by the careful selection of among the more experienced and successful Chinese students. Such conational support can help reduce academic pressure from the language, while the vicarious experience of successful Chinese students can potentially motivate new comers during their early transition, considering that students’ academic self-efficacy can be increased by peer comparison (Bandura,1995). However, given the possible constraints such as balancing mentoring time and their own study, mentors need to feel positive about mentoring. Providing a certificate as evidence of mentors’ contribution to enhancing others’
learning experience, which mentors can use in their CV to demonstrate their skills, may be considered as an option.

It should be pointed out that cultural integration should also be considered while utilising conational support. Given that perceived isolation and lack of belonging among some participants, as a result of the consequences of ‘cultural ghettoization’, which has been extensively explored in similar literature (Brown, 2009; Gallagher, 2013), care should be taken in creating opportunities for internationals students to integrate with home students. In language-focused units, for example, tutors’ conscious effort in designing learning activities aimed at engaging students from diverse cultural backgrounds can motivate such cultural integration.

10.4.6 Raising staff and students’ awareness of different cultures of learning

The study provides further evidence that culture is a fluid construct and that individual learners within a certain culture are capable of change over time, as suggested by this study, and supported by the literature (Dervin, 2011; Iannelli & Huang, 2014). Certainly, change appears to be strongly influenced by students’ mindsets. While this research has focused on the mindsets of students, those of the teachers can be crucial too. Cortazzi and Jin (2011) propose that intercultural learning in HE involves ‘cultural synergy’, which involves “a combination of reciprocal learning” about each other’s cultures of learning between the UK teachers and Chinese students (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013, p. 100). Mutual understanding based on such cultural synergy can help reduce the potential discrepancies between teaching and learning. For example, teachers’ understanding of the educational beliefs and their tendency to endorse strong social goals to achieve academic success among Chinese can help them adjust their educational practices to motivate these students. Staff members’ intervention and guidance can be of key importance to students with low academic achievements, particularly to those holding a fixed mindset, who tend to believe ‘limited resource theory’ (Job et al., 2010) and are more likely to use maladaptive strategies instead of utilizing the resources provided by the University.

10.5 Reflections

I also embarked on my learning journey to UK HE for the first time as I began this research. My own experience of transition to, and transformation in UK HE invariably affected my data collection and interpretation. For this reason, it is critical that I explore my journey here.

Like my participants, motivated by the same ‘push and pull’ factors discuss previously (Chapter 1), I joined the many Chinese international students in 2012 to pursue my education in the UK. Like them, I cherished the dream that I could complete my studies with high academic outcomes, with which I could realize my dream of achieving professorship in China. Unlike them, I was embarking on a PhD rather than an undergraduate degree. What I experienced, which perhaps my participants could not in
a mass education system, was a flexible one-to-one learning experience where the learning context was adapted to my needs and fostered my personal and professional growth.

I was full of expectations but unaware of the challenges ahead when I embarked on the PhD journey. I did not comprehend the words of a former PhD student, who described her PhD learning journey as ‘riding a roller coaster’ until I experienced it myself. The iterative process of data collection and analysis during the study was a test of confidence. I remember the panic I experienced after three interviews, when I was beginning to entertain the idea of having found the perfect cases, two ideal participants withdrew and I had to make the difficult decision to drop another for ethical reasons. The hardest challenge, however, was finding the theoretical underpinning. Then, the last two of my second year, I found myself unable to structure a theoretical framework led by the data. My confidence in completing the research and thus achieving my goal became seriously undermined, which left me unable to concentrate on the research.

My mother was a constant motivation when I wanted to relent in my effort to continue. Her perseverance in the face of life’s changes has been inspiring to me. Having received barely two years’ schooling due to financial difficulties of her childhood, she nevertheless learned enough vocabulary by herself to read and to letters when her children left home for university. Despite the tight family budget (which happened to most Chinese families before the late 1980s), she managed to make us children look decent among our peers by sewing clothes deep into the night. I remember finding her repeatedly modifying her work until got everything right.

My mother’s favourite saying to us during our growing up was “nothing is impossible if you put your heart to it”. This has been a constant reminder whenever I encounter difficulties. Through PhD workshops, the university teacher development workshops, chatting with other PhD friends, and more importantly, frequent discussions with my supervisors, I eventually addressed each research issue and progressed. Like some of my participants who strengthened their beliefs in a growth mindset, I found myself even more inclined towards a growth mindset as I acquired more coping strategies and improved my self-efficacy in learning and research.

Certainly, the challenges and the emotional disturbances as a result allowed me to understand and sympathize with my participants. This empathy developed over the interview period but it also affected my interpretations of their behaviour. I became more understanding to them as individuals, especially as they were experiencing similar challenges and changes as me. I was less sympathetic to my participant that did not adopt an effortful learning goal. Certainly, my empathy (or lack of) sometimes also led me to make easy assumptions as the cultural insider. Taking what the participants said without critical examination of the data was one example, until one supervisor reminded me humorously of my “seeing things through rose-tinted glasses” in his feedback. The epiphanies after finding the solutions to similar problems after discussions with supervisors and colleagues were simply beyond joy. I learned
how to interpret a situation from multiple perspectives to avoid “the inclination to see things only in a specific light” (Alvesson, 2003, p.186) as a result of cultural familiarity and a lack of critical thinking.

There were joys and frustrations, but this cross-cultural learning journey was definitely one of personal identification, growth, discovery and satisfaction. The most valuable part of it is that it has defined me as a resilient learner. I sought help, developed new learning strategies, faced challenges head on and learned from my mistakes. The inspiration from my participants, who demonstrated such tenacity and positivity, and the lessons to be learned from their mistakes, and learning too from one participant’s lack of growth are invaluable to me and I hope to others as well. The dedicated support from my supervisors, colleagues and friends has helped me to develop invaluable life assets that I would never have obtained had I not embarked on the PhD journey.

10.6 Conclusion

The longitudinal qualitative study set out to explore factors influencing Chinese international students’ academic coping and learning experience in the UK. Through detailed exploration into the variations in individual students’ academic coping strategies, approaches to learning and learning outcomes among four Chinese undergraduates in a UK university over a two-year time span, the study unravels the complex interplay between the three key elements, the individual, the educational and the cultural, in the learning process. While both cultural and educational factors are important, it appears that it is individual students’ mindsets that contribute to differing learning outcomes, including their academic achievements, cultural integration and sense of satisfaction in their transcultural education.

Little research into Chinese international students’ learning experiences has considered students’ mindsets. This qualitative study provides sufficient evidence that students’ mindsets matter in their transcultural learning. Some of the findings would not have been possible to make with a quantitative study. However, owing to the small sample, it is still unclear whether conclusions drawn from this study can be applicable to different groups of Chinese students. Future research may consider focusing on different groups using mixed methods to test these findings.

Recommendations for UK HE regarding to enhance Chinese international students’ learning experiences are made. Strategies such as diagnosing the mindsets and providing growth mindset training, increasing the understanding of cultures of learning among Chinese students and UK university staff, and utilising peer mentoring can help create a win-win situation where UK universities reach their educational targets and Chinese students enjoy the learning process and achieve their academic potential.
References


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Appendices

Appendix 1 Sources of data referred to in the text

A. Interview guides (e.g. Zihao)

1st interview guide 02/01/2013

This interview is to gain rapport and background information.

Background information

1. Why have you chosen to study in the UK?
2. Before you came to the UK, what expectations did you have?
3. Does the reality match/mismatch your expectations?
4. What are your parents’ opinions regarding your learning in the UK? (intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, relatedness)
5. How do you feel about your parents’ expectations? (internalisation)
6. When you have difficulty in study, whom would you like to turn to? (relatedness)
7. In what way do your friends influence your study? (self-regulation)
8. How do you like learning in the UK, particularly group presentations/discussions? (different cultures of learning)
9. How do you like speaking out in English in class? (language competence, relatedness)
10. What do you think about the UK teachers in contrast to Chinese teachers in China? (cultures of learning)

2nd interview guide for Zihao 28/01/2013

This interview is to elaborate on the points mentioned in the 1st interview. The focus will be on: course choice, perception of academic difficulties (language in particular), relationships with peers and teachers.

1. You said you chose a more difficult course. Can you explain more?
2. How many assessments do you need to complete (essays, exams)?
3. How do you cope with academic difficulties (with examples)?
4. You study alongside home students. Can you tell me something about your group work with them?
5. How do Chinese students influence your learning process?
6. How do you like your study in the UK?
7. Anything different from studying in China?

3rd interview guide for Zihao 20.10. 2013 PK 2.28
This interview will focus on:

A. His relationships with peers (Chinese and home students), parents and teachers.

B. his perceptions of challenges in essays, English learning, pressure and worries during study

1. What do you think of your study this year?
2. You had several exams last TB. Could you let me know the results?
3. Was remembering the cases enough for you to pass the exams?
4. Shall we talk about essay writing?
   o --are you satisfied with the results, why and why not?
   o --do they affect your confidence in some way?
   o --how did you prepare an essay?
   o --how did you feel about the writing process?
   o --what difficulties and how to overcome them?
   o --what did you do when you experienced difficulty?
   o --Were you satisfied with your essays before turning them in?
   o --are you confident that in the future, your essays will get better?
5. How do you treat teachers’ feedback?
6. How do you feel about your English?
   o --Are you able to follow the law lecturers now?
   o --Are you able to join in the discussions with home students?
   o --Have you made effort to learn English?
7. How what way have your parents/ friends/ teachers/ UK people influenced you?
8. Do you still experience any pressure from study?
9. What major changes have you been through since you came to the UK?
10. Any turning points in your life since you came here?

4th interview for Zihao (Room 2.8 Library, 20 Feb, 2014)

You mentioned you were lack of goals so you were in doubt. What about now, any changes?

1. How do you feel about your performance last TB?
   a. Was the essay writing process going well?
   b. When you are free to choose an essay topic, what are your considerations ( difficulty, high mark, teachers’ preferences, etc.)
   c. What about the presentations/exams?
d. Group work with home students?

2. You mentioned difficulties in learning law course:
   a. How do you feel about the vocabulary?
   b. What strategies have you used?

3. Can you understand law lectures better?
   a. What methods have you used to improve this?
   b. Why have you chosen this method?

4. You mentioned something must have been wrong with your method to study law:
   a. Have you found the solutions?
   b. Have you discussed this with teachers?

5. So far, what has been the most difficult part of UK university life for you? The most successful part?

6. Your assessment consists of almost all of essay writing. Do you think you have some strategies to deal with essay writing effectively now?
   - Have your strategies changed?
   - What have you learned exactly from essay writing?
   - You mentioned you do not read teachers’ feedback carefully. What about now?
   - In your opinion, what counts as a good essay?
   - Has your opinion changed over time?

7. You also had to take exams. What strategies have proved effective/ineffective for you?
   - Could you give me examples?
   - Have your ideas changed over time?

8. In your opinion, what counts as successful learning?
   - Has your idea about this changed since you came to the UK?
   - Do you think the methods you used in Chinese schools or university could be effectively applied to UK education? Why and why not?

9. Have you received responses from a university that you have applied to for your MA?
   - Are you anticipating any future academic difficulties?
   - Do you feel pressurised when thinking about your MA course?
   - How do you plan to deal with these difficulties?

10. Now if you were asked to offer suggestions to other Chinese students similar to your situations who are coming to the UK to study, what would you say?
Zihao 5th interview guide 10.05.2014

This interview will clarify the influence from his past education, his social goals, changes in his conceptions of learning, and strategy use.

1. What did you learn in your former Chinese university?
2. Was memorisation of facts useful for you in China?
3. What about the PSE in Wuhan?
4. Did you anticipate some challenges when studying in the UK?
5. You mentioned in our chats yesterday that in group discussions, EU students prepared better and talked more. Why was that?
6. You mentioned that were “in deep valley”, your method of study was not right and you could not answer questions appropriately in class. Could you illustrate with some examples?
7. In the 4th interview, you mentioned you began to visit every subject teacher. Why did you make such a sudden change?
8. You mentioned language was a problem. Sometimes a word carried a different meaning in law. So how exactly did language prevent you from study in class?
9. How do you feel the influence from your classmates, both Chinese and home students?
10. In what way has the Chinese education influence your UK study?

Zihao’s 6th interview 19.05.14

1. Further clarification of the changes and the causes for these changes
2. Could you let me know some academic difficulties that you had encountered in China?
3. How did you cope with your difficulties differently between in China and in the UK?
4. Why are there such differences?
5. In terms of your motivations to learn, have you experienced changes between in China and in the UK?
6. When you get a low mark in the assessment, what do you attribute it to (efforts/ability)?
7. Anything else you’d like to share with me?

B. Examples of transcripts (original vs. edited versions)

1st Interview with Wei (B) on 22.01.2013, Park 0.08 (original English transcript)

I: Can I ask you some questions related to your experience in the UK?

B: Yeah.

I: Why have you chosen to study in the UK?

B: It’s my parents. They think it’s better to study here than in a Chinese university because you can learn real things here.
I: Can you give an example?

B: For example, it’s very hard for Chinese students to enter a university, but very easy to graduate. Here it’s easy for you to enter but hard to graduate. So in order to graduate, you have to study very hard.

In China, after university, you have to go to work. (But) many students just play for many years while in university, but here I have no choice.

I: What do you mean by ‘no choice’?

B: Different from in China, here English is our second language. It’s hard.

I: You mean it’s hard for you to study.

B: Yes.

I: How long have you been here?

B: This is my second year.

I: Are you able to adapt to the life here?

B: Yeah yeah.

I: Do you enjoy studying here?

B: Yes, I enjoy it very much. There are many interesting stories.

I: Really?! Would you like to share some with me?

B: For example, when I came here a year ago, my IELTS was only 4.5. English was my big problem.

I went to a language school. It was very hard.

I was very sad because of my problem with language. And we had essays to write. Very hard.

At the beginning, the first four weeks, I never passed them. After hard work, I graduated from the language school. When I came to the university, I find it’s easy. But I find….

I: In what sense is it easy?

B: It’s easy to learn in a language school. At a language school, they assess students by different levels. After the language school, they decide whether a student should go to Level 4, 5 or 6. It’s my first year. The hardest is the second year.

I: This year is harder?

B: Yes. Because of more subjects.

I: Do you mean all subjects or just language units?

B: All units. This year I have 20,000-30,000 word essays.

I: 20000-30,000 words?

B: Yes. I do not choose exams, so I write essays. I have to manage this. After this interview, I will go to the library. I was in the library before I got your message.

I: Appreciate that. I didn’t know this.
B: In the first semester in the university, I lost my confidence because all my courses were just ‘pass’, around 40-50 points. In the second semester, I worked really hard. After this first degree, I will do my master’s in the UK. I come here not only for language study, but also for culture.

I: That’s great.

B: After this year, I will go to homestay.

I: You want to stay in the UK after your study?

B: Yes. Maybe.

I: Is it your own decision or your parents’ decision?

B: It’s our decision, our family decision.

I: (Laughing) your joint decision?

B: Yeah.

I: But do you like the idea?

B: Yes. Because I found many Chinese doing business here, but the Chinese are separated from the British.

I: Why are they separated?

B: Firstly is the language barrier and secondly is their culture.

I: Do you like talking with UK people?

B: Yeah yeah. I always feel both interesting and happy. Because they are warm to you at first; and after that, they just show (mimicking a rebuffing sound).

I: Do you mean they change their attitude?

B: Yeah yeah…they become cold later.

I: Can you show me an example?

B: I will show you an example of the lecturers, but I do not want to name her…When I see her in the library, I want to say Hi, but she just walked on as if she did not know me.

When they do not teach me, when I greet them, they don’t talk to me. Maybe they do not like me? It’s just my opinion. It makes me sad.

I: You mean their attitude makes you sad?

B: Yes. Very sad

I: Does it affect your study?

B: Yes.

I: So you do not study as hard?

B: No, no. I do not care about this because I talked with the tutor. He told me not to worry about it saying “In London, there are all sorts of discriminations”. British people like to smile, but that’s not real smile. They are actually very cold.
I: So do the British people’s attitudes towards you change your attitude toward them?

B: No. I do not care. I will remain warm to them (Laughter)

I: Why?

B: Because I cannot be unkind to them. I do not want to make them sad.

I: That’s very kind of you! Have you been to a Chinese university—are you on an exchange programme?

B: Yes, I know what you mean. Before I came here, I went to Fujian Normal University.

I: You were formally admitted into that university?

B: No. I was there in 2009. Only for one year. They had an agreement with this university. They just taught us how to learn English language and culture.

I: Were you an English major?

B: Yes. I received training in English.

I: Speaking of university education, do you find any differences between the two systems?

B: Very different. You know, different cultures are bound to have different pieces. Because we are different students from other Chinese university students. The Chinese universities do not have a responsibility toward us. We just paid the money. And they promised to send us abroad. There is an agreement. They will just ensure they get the visa for us.

I: Were you formally accepted by that Chinese university through the national college entrance exam?

B: No. It’s another kind of exam.

I: Was it easier?

B: No…but you can plagiarism. We came here to start our sophomore. We didn’t go through the National Entrance Exam. We were all enrolled in some exchange programs.

I: Really? Many students here share similar experience?

B: All of us. Mostly it’s like this. I am sure.

I: So you paid the money to a Chinese university, then received some training, then came to a UK university through some agreement?

B: Yes. The first year, you spend in China. In a British university, you finish your degree.

I: You prefer to study here?

B: Yeah, yeah.

I: Which aspect do you like about it most?

B: hmm…The best is the library. There are so many resources.

I: What about teaching?

B: They are like friends. They are more friendly. They have their own duties, but after that, they do not care.
I: What do you think about this?

B: For example, last Friday (a snowy day). In the morning, I got to the university. I wanted to know whether there would be classes in the afternoon. She said: I didn’t tell you to come. It’s your own choice. She wants to go home. She does not want to work.

I: So that gave you the impression that she is not responsible?

B: Yeah. They do not like work. Easy life, not work. They like easy life.

I: Have you come across any difficulties since you came here?

B: Yeah. The most important problem is the language. There are four aspects of language learning, listening, reading, speaking and writing. Can I talk about all of them?

I: Sure.

B: First is listening. It’s very different in pronunciation. I had to improve my English. I had to record many programmes. And I listen to them every day. In the meantime, I learned many new words. And in my first year, I learned about 20-30 words every day, so after the first year, I learned about 3000 words.

I: Wow…That’s really a lot.

B: Yes. I find if you just remember the words from dictionary, you will soon forget them. So soon I learned words from materials I read. I will think: ah, I have come across this word from such and such places. Now it’s easy for me to read books.

I: So you remember words through reading.

B: Because I go to library. Every day, I read BBC. Maybe at least half an hour.

I: Do you always find the time?

B: Yes. I make a schedule.

I: So you keep a schedule your own schedule?

B: Yes. I make a new one every day. I make a schedule the night before the next day.

I: Can you always keep your schedule?

B: Yes, I must. If I do not finish all the tasks, I feel sad. Let’s talk about writing. It’s the biggest problem. It’s related to the marks. The biggest difference is how I can overcome my Chinese English. So I went to see my personal tutor. He gave me a very useful book called International Students’ Writing.

I: So you began to contact your personal tutor at the very beginning? Who told you to turn to him for help?

I: At the first year of the university, GL language teacher told me.

I: How often do you see him? Last year, once a week. This year, once every two years.

B: At the beginning, my writing was the biggest problem. He didn’t tell you how good your writing was. Just what the grammatical problem was. It’s very useful.

I also want to talk about speaking. I also got help from the LST. He gave me help in pronunciation.
I would call a phone company. Sometimes, there was no problem with my phone. But I would just call them, sometimes for half an hour. Just talking. They cannot stop me midway. Because if they do, they will run into big trouble.

I: To use the opportunity to speak English?
B: Yes. When I first came, I could hardly speak English.

I: But see how you’ve improved a lot.
B: Now my biggest problem is the use of tenses, for example, the past tense. I have made a decision. I am going to stay with a host family. I would have done so if it not for my contract. I have a two-year house contract.

I: Who are you living with?
B: My friends.

I: Chinese friends?
B: Yes. It will end in August. I do not want any big problems with the contract.

I: You are the few to choose to live with a host family after you have stayed with Chinese. It’s usually the other way around.

B: Yes. I know it’s hard. Different living habits, most importantly, different food. But I realize maybe it’s the last opportunity to learn English. So I must catch this opportunity.

I: Sure.

B: I am looking for a host family. I wish they could talk with me. I will also continue with my master’s degree.

I: Where do you want to continue with your study? At this university?
B: Perhaps not.

I: Good luck with that. Thank you very much for this interview. I really enjoyed talking with you.

I* Interview with Wei (B), 22.03.2013 Park 0.08 (edited version)

I: Can I ask you some questions related to your experience in the UK?
B: Yeah.

I: Why have you chosen to study in the UK?
B: It’s my parents. They think it’s better to study here than in a Chinese university because you can learn real things here.

I: Can you give an example?
B: For example, it’s very hard for Chinese students to enter a university, but very easy to graduate (in China). Here it’s easy for you to enter but hard to graduate. So in order to graduate, you have to study very hard.
In China, after university, you have to go to work. (But) many students just play for many years while in university, but here I have no choice.

I: What do you mean by no choice?

B: different from in China, here English is our second language, it’s hard.

I: You mean it’s hard for you to study.

B: Yes.

I: How long have you been here?

B: This is my second year.

I: Are you able to adapt to the life here?

B: Yeah, yeah.

I: Do you enjoy studying here?

B: Yes, I enjoy it very much. There are many interesting stories.

I: Really?! Would you like to share some with me?

B: For example, when I came here a year ago, my IELTS was only 4.5. English was my big problem.

I went to a language school. It was very hard. I was very sad because of my problem with the language. And we had essays to write. Very hard.

At the beginning, the first four weeks, I never passed them. After hard work, I graduated from the language school. When I came to the university, I find it’s easy. But I find….

I: In what sense is it easy?

B: It’s easy to learn in a language school. At a language school, they assess students by different levels. After the language school, they decide whether a student should go to Level 4, 5 or 6. That was my first year. The hardest is the second year.

I: This year is harder?

B: Yes. Because of more subjects.

I: Do you mean all subjects or just language units?

B: All units. This year I have 20,000-30,000 word essays.

I: 20000-30,000 words?

B: Yes. I do not choose exams, so I write essays. I have to manage this. After this interview, I will go to the library. I was in the library before I got your message.

I: Appreciate that. I didn’t know this.

B: In the first semester in the university, I lost my confidence because all my courses were just ‘pass’, around 40-50 points. In the second semester, I worked really hard. After this first degree, I will do my master’s in the UK. I come here not only for language study, but also for culture learning.

I: That’s great.
B: After this year, I will find a homestay.
I: You want to stay in the UK after your study?
B: Yes. Maybe.
I: Is it your own decision or your parents’ decision?
B: It’s our decision, our family decision.
I: (Laughing) your joint decision?
B: Yeah.
I: But do you like the idea?
B: Yes. Because I found many Chinese doing business here, but the Chinese are separated from the British.
I: Why are they separated?
B: Firstly is the language barrier and secondly is their culture.
I: Do you like talking with UK people?
B: Yeah, yeah. I always feel both interesting and happy. Because they are warm to you at first; and after that, they just show (mimicking a rebuffing sound).
I: Do you mean they change their attitude?
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When they do not teach me, when I greet them, they don’t talk to me. Maybe they do not like me? It’s just my opinion. It makes me sad.
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I: Does it affect your study?
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I: So you do not study as hard?
B: No, no. I do not care about this because I talked with the LST. He told me not to worry about it saying “In London, there are all sorts of discriminations”. British people like to smile, but that’s not real smile. They are actually very cold.
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B: No. I do not care. I will remain warm to them (Laughter)
I: Why?
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I: Really? Many students here share similar experience?

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I: So you paid the money to a Chinese university, then received some training, then came to a UK university through some agreement?

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I: Which aspect do you like about it most?

B: The best is the library. There are so many resources.

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B: Teachers are like friends. They are more friendly. They have their own duties, but after that, they do not care.

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I: So you remember words through reading.

B: Because I go to library. Every day, I read BBC. Maybe at least half an hour.

I: Do you always find the time?

B: Yes. I keep a schedule.

I: So you keep a schedule your own schedule?

B: Yes. I make a new one every day. I make a schedule the night before the next day.

I: Can you always keep your schedule?

B: Yes, I must. If I do not finish all the tasks, I feel sad. Let’s talk about writing. It’s the biggest problem. It’s related to the marks. The biggest difference is how I can overcome my Chinese English. So I went to see the Learning Support Tutor. He lent me a very useful book called International Students’ Writing.

I: So you began to contact your personal tutor at the very beginning? Who told you to turn to him for help?

B: At the first year of the university, GL language teacher told me.

I: How often do you see him?

B: Last year, once a week. This year, once every two years. At the beginning, my writing was the biggest problem. He didn’t tell you how good your writing was,. Just what the grammatical problem was. It’s very useful.

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I: Who are you living with?

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B: Yes. It will end in August. I do not want any big problems with the contract.

I: You are the few to choose to live with a host family after you have stayed with Chinese. It’s usually the other way around.

B: Yes. I know it’s hard. Different living habits, most importantly, different food. But I realize maybe it’s the last opportunity to learn English, So I must catch this opportunity.

I: Sure.

B: I am looking for a host family. I wish they could talk with me. I will also continue with my master’s degree.

I: Where do you want to continue with your study? At this university?

B: Perhaps not.

I: Good luck with that. Thank you very much for this interview. I really enjoyed talking with you.

C. Examples of open coding and focused coding

1. Open coding for Zihao’s 3rd interview (translated from Chinese)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>How is your course study this TB?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My Course is Law with Business Communication. Last term I had two courses in law only, but this TB, there are no business courses; all are law units. There are many more units. Monday and Tuesday classes last till 6pm. Some are related to last year’s and they are easier, but two new courses are very difficult to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>How do you feel about it?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am under lots of pressure now. One of law teachers for the courses seem to be a new one, who seems to have problems with teaching methods, and would keep reading her courseware…a bit boring. I cannot understand the course very well either. Mainly because it’s new, and also she just keeps reading.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I How do you manage these courses?  
I just keep writing notes all the time, and will go over them after class. I just have to manage to understand what I can.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping strategy—note-taking</th>
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I Do you preview the lessons?  
I have a big problem with preview. Before each seminar, there would be some seminar hand-outs, or teacher’s coursework for us to prepare the questions. I will try to find the answers before every class, but teachers here are not like Chinese teachers who’d give you the answers in class following the order. Here, they do not follow the orders of the questions; They talk little according to the hand-outs, but uses divergent thinking. I cannot grasp the key ideas while doing the preview—So my preview does not seem to be effective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Searching for correct answers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective learning strategy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I How do you preview the lessons?  
I just try to find out the answers to the questions.

| Preview—surface learning |

I Perhaps there is sth wrong with your method?  
I think I have not spent enough time reading (hesitating, silent)

I What about the other unit?  
The other is Employment Law, which I didn’t have last term…in seminars, students are grouped around three round tables, and teacher would ask us questions by each table. So I am anxious that I may be asked to answer questions. Because sometimes when I gave an answer, and I thought I gave a good answer, but the teacher did not seem to understand me, and she would say: I believe you have understood the question, but let me ask another student. Perhaps my answer was not right. I just feel…(speechless, silent)

| Anxiety in class, Frustrations, And sense of loss |

I Do you think she didn’t understand you, because of your accent or the content?  
I think it’s the content. I would find an answer from the internet or a book, but the emphasis could be different from others.

| Surface learning without understanding |

I How does this affect you?  
I feel a sense of loss. I have spent a lot of effort trying to find the answer, and the result is she couldn’t understand it at all.

| Emotion-coping due to ineffective strategy, Effort directed at surface learning |

I What about the next time in class?  
Next time, I will try to answer easier questions which have definite answers and try to answer less those involved personal views.

| Uncertainty avoidance, saving face |

I So you volunteer in class?  
Yes. As the teacher will take turns to ask each table some questions, I will try not to answer questions that do not have definite answers…

I 6.50 you said you have always felt ‘very low’. Could you let me know why?
First of all, I chose this course not out of my interest, as I did not understand it very much, but simply because there was such a course. Now I have no interest in it. What’s more, after last year’s examinations, I felt I had spent a lot more efforts than others, but there weren’t many differences in the exam results. E.g. In one law examination, we were asked to select 3 out of 7 questions to answer. There was one question that I answered correctly but not my two flatmates. Still, they got similar results as I. The mark was very low and I barely passed it. Perhaps my study method was not right.

The last year’s assessment result was not satisfactory, especially in law courses. I barely passed all of them. But I got over 60 for business courses.

In order to reach 2.1, I will have to wait for the result of this year. I felt very indignant. They got it wrong, but they got marks even a bit higher than me. I went to the lecturer to ask about it, but he couldn’t explain clearly. He just showed me how many points I got from each part.

And he assured me there’s no mistake about the mark.

I just feel perhaps my method to study law is not appropriate. I feel my effort did not pay off.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>Speaking of the method, have you consulted your teachers about it? E.g. Personal tutor?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes. Last year, we had personal tutoring classes. But this year, since we have many classes, there are no specific classes for personal tutoring. But if we need them, we can go to them, as we have many classes this year.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>Regarding your study method, did you realize the problem after the exam, or you have always been confused about it?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After the exam. I asked my personal tutor about my study method, and he referred me to others. He seldom gives the direct answers.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>Have you visited the people he referred you to?</th>
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</table>
|   | I did not feel his recommendations very helpful sometimes…e.g.he would recommend us to attend some seminars by a couple of teachers which introduce some study methods instead of finding a one-to-one support. They are aimed at the general audience or many students, not individual problems.
I have been to them two or three times. They talked about general ideas, like how to take notes and review the lessons…I learned them in China already….They are not specific to individual problems. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>What’s your main difficulty in learning law?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mainly because there are too many new words.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>I did not remember you talking about vocabulary as the main problem.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Have you thought about ways to improve your reading?</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>I have tried to memorise more vocabulary, but I cannot persist. Then I have tried to preview earlier. One or two days I print out all the materials on Moodle. During the weekend, I will preview the next week’s lessons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort in voc, but not consistent</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Preview lessons</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>How’s the result.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>I feel a little better.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>How much do you think language affects your law study?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>I believe basically all problems are caused by language. If I can know all the language, and I am able to follow their thinking, so understanding should be much easier. But now because of language problem…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language as obstacle to learning subject areas</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>Perhaps you could listen to some related programmes, or have a law vocabulary book at hand to go over them? Now with the problems in studying law, do you have the confidence to continue?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14:20</td>
<td>recently I have been in the process of applying for a Master’s course. Although IELTS is not required, I need to get 5 courses over 60 in order to reach 2.1. Last year, of the three courses over 60, only two will be counted in. so this year, I will have to obtain another three courses over 60.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure from Master’s course</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>So it’s challenging for you?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes. At first, I saw them as a goal. But after several weeks so far, I find the goal getting more and more distant. I somewhat feel less motivated and disheartened. I clearly feel the courses are much more difficult than last year. Last year, there were a couple of courses in business and GL 5, where I could achieve high scores. This year, I only have GL6. all assessments of employment law course are based on essays. And the rest of the courses more or less involve exams as well. I feel they are very difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement goals unattainable, Self-efficacy weakened</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>Last term, you mentioned that you just memorised to pass the exam. Did you find that effective?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Hmm…short-term memory is effective. It’s enough to deal with exams. Two courses are related to last years. In class, when teachers mentioned a case, I would occasionally recall it as I memorised it last year…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorisation in dealing with exams; in relating to new courses</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>So in law courses, memorisation is necessary?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes. For example, in a liability case, you are asked to identify who is liable for a case. There are procedures—you need to identify those factors involved and then describe your analysis. You have to provide evidence to support your argument.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I have you found ways about how to learn similar subjects more effectively?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I still do not know the answer yet; otherwise, I would not be so troubled by it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I have you consulted some relevant teachers for help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, I told them about my problems last year. Some told me to send my answers before class for them to see whether I answered them right. They know that the only four international students have difficulty learning this unit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers knew there are only a couple of Chinese students, so they would send the questions to us beforehand. My personal tutor also mentioned Chinese students’ problems to them, so they would send the answers to us Chinese students beforehand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>But not this term. There are more courses and teachers are very busy. Some teachers are not from the university, but invited to teach here. One works for some big company and he comes to teach for a couple of days at the university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He is very busy. He told us that if we need to contact him, we must send him emails on specific days of specific weeks, as he works in a company every day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I perhaps you would like to give it a try? Teachers can be extremely helpful in your case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Actually after last year, I do not hold much hope this year. Last year, I tried but did not find it quite helpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I why not? Are you worried that you could not make yourself understood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not exactly. Last year, there were two law courses, but only one teacher was warm-hearted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I perhaps teachers are different this year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perhaps just because I tried and did not find it effective, I do not have such hope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I perhaps you should take the initiative. From my experience of attending tutorial workshops, I found teachers are willing to help students who go to them….but you have to be proactive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I let’s talk about your essays. How many essays did you write last year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There were essays for almost all courses. Those I did around Christmas (first term) were not good. The references for law were different. Law course has different versions. There are a variety of versions online, so it’s messy for me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to write the references. But around summer vacation (end of second term), it’s much better.

1. So you had difficulty in referencing, not in content?

That’s right. About the content, normally I started to do brainstorming in Chinese to work out a structure. Then I just express the ideas in English and write the target number of words. I did not find it very difficult. Sometimes, however, I find I lack the depth and insight. Perhaps I didn’t spend enough time.

2. How long do you normally spend on an essay?

Those around last Christmas, perhaps I started too late, I spent only around 1 to 2 weeks as there was not enough time.

Then around Easter, as there were many days off, I would spend around 1 month on an essay. After the 1st draft, I would add more information if I found something was lacking.

I belong to those people who do not strike up a relationship with others very quickly. Before Christmas, I did not know many people; but later as I made friends with more people, and I came across them in the library very often and would discuss with them. Then I found I might have missed some points or that I needed to pay attention to some formatting. Then I would further improve my essays.

23:40 time management in essay writing

Chinese peer support Essay writing improvement

3. So who are your friends?

Mostly Chinese students.

4. You mentioned before that you would delay preparation of your examination. What about now?

It’s better now. That’s before Christmas…Later, as I got to know more people, I would discuss with them as there were more ideas to share.

The reason why I would like to discuss with Chinese is, when I miss some points or have questions while writing an essay, I can directly express myself efficiently with Chinese students. I do not have to worry about how to express myself in English.

5. You mentioned feeling isolated by home students in group discussions. What about now?

There is not such a feeling now because we do not have such discussions any more. In the above mentioned round table class, the Chinese students sat together. We could not discuss much anyway.

The teachers will treat each table as a group…at first he would ask each table by turn, but now, perhaps he finds us contribute little most of the time, he will ask other EU/home students and ask us less often.

6. Have you any home student as friends?

I became familiar with some last year, but I have never seen them this year. Perhaps we are not studying the same subjects.

7. Do you feel integrated with home students, as I can see the majority are home students in your lecture?

Group discussions

Relationships with home students Little discussions among Chinese compatriots

Changed emotion coping Conational support Language barrier between home students
It’s very difficult. The problem is communication, I think. First of all, law course itself demand your personal opinions…

E.g. There was an exam to analyse whether to sue a person. The correct answer is not to. But I said yes. Just because I had my own opinion and explained it well, I still got a high mark. Then I asked the teacher about it, and he replied that whether right or not, first of all, you need to express your personal opinions and your understanding

So if I want to communicate with them, I do not know much about law; then I will have to think how to express myself. I do not have sufficient knowledge in law. I would have difficulty expressing myself in Chinese, and it becomes even harder to communicate in English….perhaps I could express myself clearer in Chinese, but I have to translate it into English, thus I have to think two things at the same time.

I So far from what we have discussed, it seems that problems are related to language. So have you made any special effort to improve it?

It seems…(hesitating ) I haven’t found any effective ways to improve it.

I Perhaps you could go to some seminars on language learning…what about other Chinese classmates. Do you discuss with each other quite often?

Last year, there was a final year student. He came a year earlier than me, and speaks good English, also a male student, so I would discuss with him last year.

But the girls seldom contributed in class, but in the exam, they could both get fairly good results.

I What about essay feedback?

There is an undergraduate centre where we would get the feedback.

I How do you use teacher feedback?

I would first of all look at the marks. And see some mistakes, like grammar, that teachers pointed out. I would only have a glance at teachers’ comments on where to improve.

I Is teachers’ feedback useful?

Hesitantly…feedback will be effective if it is given for drafts. Then I will improve so that I can get a higher mark next time. But for essays without drafts, I pay less attention to them. As I think after all, it’s over, as the mark is decided and it may not be useful in the future.

I How do you see marks and ability? Which do you pay more attention to?

I focus more on marks (silent)

I What about ability?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hmm hesitatingly…I do not think writing will be very useful in my future work, so after it is given back, I seldom read my writing.</td>
<td>Feedback: usefulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you continue to improve your essay writing after each draft?</td>
<td>Essay writing—more time and better results (effort attribution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the time, if I have the time, before turning it in, I would try to improve it… Before Christmas, there wasn’t enough time and I felt a bit in a rush…after Christmas, I needed to submit two papers for English legal system… I got a low mark for the first paper. With the second, I started early and completed in a couple of weeks, but continued to improve three or four more weeks. This unit was difficult and the question were given by the same teacher so I didn’t hold high hope for it. I did not leave a good impression on the course teacher, as I was sometimes even caught sleeping in his class. But I got a pretty high mark.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>But why did you sleep in class?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The class hour was around 2pm-3pm, and I could not normally take a nap at home, so I just could help feeling sleep.…. Without a nap, even now, I still feel sleepy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think of the help from your teachers and home students?</td>
<td>Relatedness towards teachers, Self-perceived prejudice from English people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It depends. Some teachers who understand international students have language problems, so they are friendly and patient. They will tell us not to hesitate to see them after class when we have problems. But others, I feel they still have prejudice. E.g. There was a psychology experiment. …The English guy (the researcher) was really bad. He was apparently discriminating (against us) by saying: we are looking for the worst students among you. Because they would offer 7 pounds, many Chinese students participated….I felt prejudiced and left…His attitude was really bad.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You mentioned you feel low now?</td>
<td>Choosing a Master’s: pressure from achieving high marks, but low self-efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes. A week ago, I was trying to apply for my Master’s course, and asked the Agency for better universities… At first, I was still hoping to achieve another 3 courses over 60. At first, I saw this as a goal to pursue, as I had chosen some courses that I thought would be easy to obtain over 60%. But after these weeks, I found the difficulty is really beyond my expectations, and the offer that I have received is not ideal. I would like to acquire a Master’s in business. But some of the universities charge so much that I feel it’s both unrealistically expensive and sounds unprofessional. £17000 a year is just too much. I am still waiting and hope to obtain an exciting one to motivate me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who makes such decisions for you? Your parents?</td>
<td>Financial constraints and aims</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Financial constraints and aims
my parents about my decision. Not because I need their support, but to share with them.

My parents are very understanding and supportive. Sometimes, I consult with them the choices of courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>How do you see yourself in self-regulation?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I do not feel I have been totally involved in my study yet probably because I lack in specific goals and therefore, I have no motivations...when I first came, my goal was definite—to obtain high marks and attend a prestigious university for my ma. But after some time, especially the past few weeks, I began to doubt myself: have I aimed too high? So...I have been hesitating...If my goal is not distant, perhaps I could have a fixed plan every day and carry it out. But once I begin to doubt myself, most of the time is wasted on the doubt instead of focusing on my study...I have nobody to talk with...my ex-girlfriend has left for an American university. Apart from the two girls, I have another male student sharing the flat with me. He has no particular goal in life, and is not serious about his study, just waiting to take his Master’s degree back to China to find a job. The two girls are very lazy and will just play in their spare time. I am of the kind of people who need better company to encourage me.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

| Parents’ moral support |
| Emotion-coping interferes in study |
| Self-doubt about his goals |
| Self-regulation not strong |
| Negative influence from Chinese compatriots; Unsupported by peers |

2. Focused coding for Dan’s 3rd interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>How do you like the lectures and seminars this term?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel restive every Tuesday because I have lessons from morning till 5pm in the afternoon. Also, we have a different language teacher for GL6. His way of teaching is every time he enters the classroom, he will ask us to do group work, 4-5 people, and he will not say anything, just stand there watching us to discuss the questions in the textbooks, one after another. Then he will ask us to change groups and continue to discuss, till class is over. He does not give us the correct answer, but the results of the discussions could only be the students’ ideas. Sometimes we may happen to have the same answers, so they might not always be the correct answers. But he will not give us the right answers. Sometimes we do not even know where we are and are asked to continue with the next, very fast. Sometimes when we were still discussing the first question, he would ask us to jump to the 3rd. We all feel lost. We feel helpless and frustrated. He just says nothing in class.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

| Negative emotion coping |
| Dislike CLT in GL6: conflicts in ‘style match’ |
| Surface learning |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>Have you raised this issue with him?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. that’s his way of teaching. He taught the same way last semester.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>So you feel you cannot learn anything?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indeed, he just asked us to discuss. Some teachers will teach and ask us to discuss and then give us the answer. M, for example, would ask us to discuss mainly, but he will also give us the answers after the discussion. I cannot feel anything. I do not what to say about the discussion. GL 6 class is the most boring.</td>
<td></td>
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265
<p>| | |</p>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Then in BC 3, it’s OK. There will be presentations. I have not prepared mine very well. We are all expecting the previous teacher to come back from her sick leave. This replacement teacher will extend one 15-minute presentation to one hour, trying to pick out our mistakes.</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction with BC 3 class teaching style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>So you think the tempo is a bit too slow or what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it’s not like that. Perhaps she has more ideas. E.g. she will find out the tiny mistakes like the placement of a picture and ask: Is this a photo you took yourself? If not, why not cite the sources? She is just too particular and strict. A bit fussy. We all feel frustrated. Last week, one group of 3 delivered a 15-minute presentation and she elaborated on their performances for a whole one hour!</td>
<td>Negative views on BC 3 class (styles match)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about the structure of your course?</td>
<td>Considering Master’s application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There aren’t big differences in the structure of syllabus. Communication Theory is added. I feel they are very much similar to last semester’s. business-related. The arrangement is OK with me, as I am applying for my Master’s in this aspect.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did you make up your mind to do a Master’s course?</td>
<td>Social goal to achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In summer vacation. My father has always wanted me to get a Master’s, and I was hesitating. But later I thought it’s a pity not to take a Master’s, which lasts only one year. I am used to living here. My friend who left last year said to me: I feel so reluctant to go. I have the same feeling. Why all of sudden should I have such a feeling? If I go back without a Master’s, I will feel sorry. I have been used to this slow tempo of life here.</td>
<td>Enjoying slow tempo of UK life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking of the tempo, you mentioned last time, that ‘by now, I do not have any worries’. What about now?</td>
<td>Performance goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do have some worries now. First the projects, so many words. I am not confident to complete them as I have never written so many words. Even now, I am totally unclear about what to write about. Write about communication relationship? Business communications? Too difficult to obtain information. Perhaps I cannot obtain enough information for either.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Have you tried Google Scholar?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are not supposed to use that. My roommate also said this. We must cite at least 5 books.</td>
<td>Misinformation about sources from peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Google Scholar and google are different. Google Scholar is a search engine for academic journal only, so you do not have to worry about that (I explained by how to use Google Scholar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh…but I still do not know what to write, from what perspective? What should I study? I have no clear objective at all.</td>
<td>Low self-efficacy in writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>You many start to read more and use key words to search for information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I turned in an outline. I had to as it’s required. But still I do not know where to start. 9:07 I am considering whether I should change a topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This final project has been bothering you for over one month. (she told me about it over a month ago, in front of PK)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes. I have not found out what perspective to write about yet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Have you done some research yet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, I have not searched for anything. But I have been going over the issue in my mind. I have been thinking: what on earth am I going to research on this topic?</td>
<td>Low self-efficacy in research skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you got your supervisor’s advice?</td>
<td>She asked me to search in books. I have borrowed a book on presentation skills. But I do not think I can extend the ideas to 5000 words. Just so difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perhaps you should search for key words first, and then find relevant materials, and then search more based on the references…</td>
<td>I searched on the library website, or e-books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last semester, you felt worry free. But you are experiencing anxiety and pressure?</td>
<td>Yes. Since this term, I have been experiencing pressure. Last year, normally, I would not feel anxious and pressure until after Christmas, when there would be many assignments. But this term, perhaps I am going to apply for my Master’s, and I must get credits, so I cannot afford to get relaxed. That’s why I feel pressured. There are so many assignments this semester. So I keep doing presentations and turning in assignments continually all the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was your performance last year?</td>
<td>It’s all right. I did not work as hard as this year, but I passed all units last year very smoothly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normally students feel anxious and worried in their first year…</td>
<td>I did not experience feelings of urgency either in Year 1 or Year 2. This year, the 3rd year, I begin to experience that. Both because of the application to Master’s and the Project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you reached a 2.1 degree?</td>
<td>No, I have not reached 2.1. It’s 2.2 at the moment. But I have not received any reply yet. The worries are distributed between MA and the assignments. I want to get higher marks for the Master’s. So eventually, everything is down to the Master’s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You mentioned you treated the essays like enemies in writing, having to write by counting the words. Could you let me know about the essay writing process later?</td>
<td>I feel so disappointed that I did not get a high mark for professional communications last semester. I consulted the most materials and did a complete questionnaire for that assignment, yet, I got the lowest score for all my essays. Perhaps it’s because the teacher gave low marks to all the class. The average marks in my class is around 40. But I feel whether you can get a high or low score, it’s not decided by the quality of your essay, but by the teachers who want to give you high or low marks to the whole class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So you would see how your classmates perform if you found your score was low?</td>
<td>Yes. Then I asked him whether he had made a mistake, and his answer was No, saying: you could read your feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you read the feedback?</td>
<td>I was not able to find it in the resource centre. That was end of May so I left for China.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you read teachers’ feedback?</td>
<td>Yes. I get it at the Learning Resource Centre. The problems are related to grammar or to arguments that are not correct.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you improve next time?</td>
<td>I will improve my grammar. I search online for the errors I made. Sometimes I will remember but sometimes not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Sometimes when you receive low marks. How do they affect your confidence to study?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel helpless. The moment you get the mark, you will try to figure out: could I pass it? If not, what shall I do? I start to work out the weightings of the essay in the whole unit, and see whether in combination of exams or presentations I can pass the unit. The last thing is why the mark is so low? All Chinese students do the same.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low self-efficacy after setbacks; Strategic balancing the scores, performance goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>What are the possible reasons for your low score?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You get that from the feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Can you understand the feedback?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes. The typed ones are OK but when it is handwritten, it’s difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>In that case, do you ask your teachers, or classmates?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. at most, I might ask my flatmate: what is this word? And then let it be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeking no professional help; neglecting feedback, Performance goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>How does a low score affect your confidence to study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Repeated as I have not got the answer)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The professional communications was the second essay result. When I do not get a good mark for the essay, I begin to worry about the exams. As once I do not have a good score in essays, I will prepare for the exam. The exam is made up of multiple choices, with many questions to be completed in a short time. So I began to worry whether I would do well in the exam. If not, the whole course would fail. So I started to prepare for the exam and left the essay issue aside. 17:55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategically balancing the scores between essays and exams— performance goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Did it affect your confidence?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Not very much. I knew if I could pass the exam, get over 40, then I would pass. Of course I would like a higher score, but the bottom line is, I must get over 40; otherwise, you will have to resit. Or what if you would have to repeat? I have passed all the units so far, luckily. I got a very high score in the exam. I practised the test banks, some units provide about 1000, e.g. marketing. Or go over the handouts distributed by the teacher, e.g. M distributed some in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance goal; Fear of failure Balancing the scores; Attribution: luck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>In writing essays during Easter’s, did you still feel you were suffering?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I suffer when I cannot understand the topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>So, what do you do about it when this happens? Do you email teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel agonised when I do not understand the essay topic. I would discuss with classmates. I emailed teachers sometimes too. But the UK teachers provide you with indefinite answers. I remember last year, in British Culture unit, I asked the teacher what I should write about. She asked me to write out an outline and showed it to her next class. If wrong, I will let you know. She said: that’s right. It was the only occasion that I asked the teachers, because I feel teachers explain the essays requirements in class, so even if I ask them, they will not give me more details. That’s why I will discuss essays with my friends instead. Teachers are different, and some teachers give different requirements and also more details in other classes, so I will discuss with them and then I know how to write.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Essay issue Avoid professional help Seeking right or wrong answers (conceptions of learning) Seeking peer help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Speaking of grammar. You mentioned your English level had actually dropped since coming here. Do you still feel the same?**

Ah… I feel more or less I have improved. E.g., we went to a western restaurant and my friend exclaimed: oh, we can read an English menu already! After all, it’s been two years. I feel I have improved in small ways.

**Small ways? What about lectures, e.g. communication theory?**

I can get about 70-80% in lectures, but I could not understand them at all when I first came.

**Do you think it’s because of the Chinese modesty, that when asked, a Chinese would say that he hasn’t improved much?**

No. to me, I still find it’s difficult to speak in English, especially when I face a Chinese. I do not know why. Only in Communication Theory, when we have foreign students. The teacher will try to pair us up with a foreign student and I can talk and learn.

**Did you turn in your essays at the deadline?**

Yes, a day before. This semester, I dare not rush at the last minute any more. There are more words, and I need to prepare earlier. For communication theory, 3000-word essay. E.g, I plan to finish that around Christmas, rather than wait until after Easter, when I will experience lot of pressure.

**So you tended to turn in your work upon the deadline because there wasn’t enough pressure?**

Yes.

**But didn’t you feel anxious trying to complete at the last minute?**

The more anxious, the more I would be pushed to write it out. Even my parents would say I am one who will not react until the last minute. Whatever I do, I have to be pushed.

**Are you satisfied with your essay after you finish it?**

Generally I am satisfied after finishing an essay. I feel it’s not bad, that I have tried my best. Some of the results are satisfactory, but feel disappointed when some marks are low, when I have made a lot of effort. I might as well just write it casually and turn it in!

**Could you let me know about your major changes since you came here? Any turning points?**

The biggest change in me so far is in dealing with assignments. By last year I would not start to think about and write an assignment till deadline was due. But now, I start to think about them earlier and start to search for sources earlier. I also visit the library more often. Last year, I seldom went to the library.

**Any influences from the teachers and friends?**

I prefer the English teachers. The Chinese teachers are just too rigid. E.g. they ask us to follow their way of answering questions. He would require us to follow his manner of answering the questions, such as A, B, and C were not right, and therefore, D. Students may challenge them, and they reply: this is a way to train your memory. This makes me angry. Why should I follow your way to answer a question? When we make a mistake, they would say: Haven’t I said that’s wrong? Such negative remarks affected us. English teachers provide you with many choices. They will not scold you even if you have made a mistake. They encourage you first. I do not want to go to his classes. I feel it’s so boring. Many students ask not to take their classes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So now you are able to push yourself to go further?</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you able to take initiative?</td>
<td>Yes. I do not have to wait or pushed by others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What other challenges do you still have. E.g. language?</td>
<td>I still have language problems. If I talk with a foreigner for a long time, there are still times when I get stuck and do not know how to express myself. I cannot express myself clearly in English. It’s a problem of vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What ways have you tried to improve your English?</td>
<td>I have bought an advanced oxford dictionary by my bed, so I can flip through in my spare time. I was not used to using a paper dictionary. I would go online to check the vocabulary. But now I find I learn more by checking in a dictionary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about reading, speaking, etc?</td>
<td>For listening, I mainly watch English operas with subtitles. For reading, I will not read beyond what is required for the assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So your reading is around the assignment? Have you done extra reading in a planned manner?</td>
<td>No, never.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about English speaking? Have you joined in any activities?</td>
<td>No… I am aware of the speaking activities, for example, Global Café, but I do not pay attention to these aspects. It’s not that I do not have the time. I enjoy staying at home after class, and then shut myself in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you often gather together with your Chinese friends?</td>
<td>Yes. But we seldom study when together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about evening time?</td>
<td>We will stay in our own room, watching TV, doing homework and doing our own things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very relaxing, isn’t it?</td>
<td>Yes. I am not very satisfied with this kind of life, for doing nothing every day. Sometimes, I suddenly realize that you are killing time, so I start to search for sources for assignments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2 Codes for observations, interviews, field notes and transcripts
A. List of observations
1. Zihao’s class observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>ZO.1 (Zihao Observation 1)</td>
<td>16/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>ZO.2</td>
<td>23/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>ZO.3</td>
<td>30/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>ZO.4</td>
<td>20/02/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>ZO.5</td>
<td>06/03/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL6</td>
<td>ZO.6</td>
<td>11/11/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law lecture</td>
<td>ZO.7</td>
<td>15/11/2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 2. Ting’s class observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>TO.1 (Ting Observation1)</td>
<td>16/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>TO.2</td>
<td>23/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>TO.3</td>
<td>30/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>TO.4</td>
<td>13/02/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>TO.5</td>
<td>27/02/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>TO.6</td>
<td>06/03/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>TO.7</td>
<td>14/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>TO.8</td>
<td>16/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL6</td>
<td>TO.9</td>
<td>12/11/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL6</td>
<td>TO.10</td>
<td>19/11/2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3. Wei’s class observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>WO.1(Wei Observation 1)</td>
<td>14/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>WO.2</td>
<td>21/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>WO.3</td>
<td>04/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL6</td>
<td>WO.4</td>
<td>09/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Culture</td>
<td>WO.5</td>
<td>11/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Culture</td>
<td>WO.6</td>
<td>18/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Culture</td>
<td>WO.7</td>
<td>25/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL6</td>
<td>WO.8</td>
<td>30/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Culture</td>
<td>WO.9</td>
<td>01/11/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC3</td>
<td>WO.10</td>
<td>12/11/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC3</td>
<td>WO.11</td>
<td>19/11/2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Dan’s class observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>DO.1 (Dan Observation 1)</td>
<td>16/01/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>DO.2</td>
<td>23/01/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>DO.3</td>
<td>30/01/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>DO.4</td>
<td>20/02/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL5</td>
<td>DO.5</td>
<td>06/03/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Com. Theories</td>
<td>DO.6</td>
<td>10/10/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Com. Theories</td>
<td>DO.7</td>
<td>17/10/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC3</td>
<td>DO.8</td>
<td>22/10/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation theory and practice</td>
<td>DO.9</td>
<td>08/11/13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. List of interviews
1. Zihao’s interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZI.1 (Zihao Interview 1)</td>
<td>31/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZI.2</td>
<td>21/02/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZI.3</td>
<td>13/11/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZI.4</td>
<td>14/02/2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZI.5</td>
<td>18/05/2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZI.6</td>
<td>23/05/2014</td>
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</table>

2. Ting’s interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TI.1 (Ting Interview 1)</td>
<td>07/02/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI.2</td>
<td>22/02/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI.3</td>
<td>13/11/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI.4</td>
<td>21/02/2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI.5</td>
<td>24/04/2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Dan’s interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DI.1 (Dan Interview 1)</td>
<td>22/02/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI.2</td>
<td>08/03/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI.3</td>
<td>01/11/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI.4</td>
<td>02/03/2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI.5</td>
<td>01/05/2014</td>
</tr>
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</table>

4. Wei’s interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WI.1 (Wei Interview 1)</td>
<td>22/01/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WI.2</td>
<td>04/03/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WI.3</td>
<td>28/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WI.4</td>
<td>02/03/2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. List of field notes

1. Zihao’s field notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZN.1 (Zihao Note 1)</td>
<td>31/01/2013-21/02/2013</td>
<td>Impressions from 1st and 2nd interviews; His GL5 class impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.2</td>
<td>08/03/13</td>
<td>My impression of GL5 performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.3</td>
<td>13/11/2013</td>
<td>Notes after 3rd interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.4</td>
<td>18/11/2013</td>
<td>GL5 &amp; GL6 easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.5</td>
<td>14/02/2014</td>
<td>Notes after 4th interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.6</td>
<td>28/03/2014</td>
<td>His Pre-sessional course &amp; IELTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.7</td>
<td>05/04/2014</td>
<td>PSE course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.8</td>
<td>25/04/2014</td>
<td>vocabulary improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.9</td>
<td>17/05/2014</td>
<td>Self-efficacy and language problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.10</td>
<td>18/05/2014</td>
<td>5th interview notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN 11.</td>
<td>23/05/2014</td>
<td>6th interview reflections and his feedback on the draft of story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZN.12</td>
<td>08/11/2014</td>
<td>Notes after going through all of the data</td>
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</table>
### 2. Ting’s field notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TN.1</td>
<td>23/02/2013</td>
<td>Strong self-regulation, strong goal to achieve high scores. Notice the repeated stress on “I try my best” (T1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN.2</td>
<td>13/11/2013</td>
<td>Mitigate difficulties, Buying an essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN.3</td>
<td>21/02/2014</td>
<td>Shift attention—part-time job; Buying an essay; Proof-reading for a course; Why not use study support; Worry about failing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN.4</td>
<td>05/04/2014</td>
<td>Impression of her Project work—good idea, bad grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN.5</td>
<td>28/04/2014</td>
<td>Before and after the 5th interview Proof-reading of the Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN.6</td>
<td>01/05/2014</td>
<td>Not worried about being accused of plagiarism for Project proof-reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN.7</td>
<td>15/07/2014</td>
<td>QQ message: High mark for Project 63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN.8</td>
<td>23/07/2014</td>
<td>Meeting her parents and discuss Ting’s cultural influences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3. Wei field note codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WN.1</td>
<td>05/04/2013</td>
<td>After the first two interviews (January, 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WN.2</td>
<td>03/06/2013</td>
<td>Academic performances of 2012-2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WN.3</td>
<td>29/09/2013</td>
<td>Recommendations for class observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WN.4</td>
<td>24/10/2013</td>
<td>Chatting in front of Purple Door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WN.5</td>
<td>28/10/2013</td>
<td>Chatting after the 3rd interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WN.6</td>
<td>22/11/2013</td>
<td>Thoughts after the 3rd interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WN.7</td>
<td>27/11/2013</td>
<td>Unhappy with standard of teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WN.8</td>
<td>10/12/2013</td>
<td>Plagiarism, teaching quality, library resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WN.9</td>
<td>01/2013-03/2013</td>
<td>Identifying Wei’s grammatical errors five times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WN.10 07/02/ 2014 Offers from 5 universities
WN.11. 18/02/ 2014 Confirmation from X Uni and his Project
WN.12 04/03/2014 Notes after the 4th interview on 02/03/2014
WN.13 15/11/14 Wei asked for further checking his grammar
WN.14 18/11/14 What other teachers and students say

4. Dan’s field notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DN.1 (Dan Note 1)</td>
<td>22/02/2013</td>
<td>First interview impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.2</td>
<td>23/03/2013</td>
<td>Choice of language in interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.3</td>
<td>01/11/13</td>
<td>3rd interview impression +GL 6 class teaching style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.4</td>
<td>03/02/2014</td>
<td>Fretting over project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.5</td>
<td>08/04/2014</td>
<td>Discussing her Project, difficulty in referencing, considering paying for proofreading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.6</td>
<td>09/04/2014</td>
<td>Proof-reading +Interview 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.7</td>
<td>20/06/2015</td>
<td>difficulty in English writing for lack of training in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.8</td>
<td>25/06/2014</td>
<td>Dan’s comment on the Structure of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.9</td>
<td>13/05/2014</td>
<td>Dan’s explanation for progress from Level 4 to Level 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.10</td>
<td>02/07/2014</td>
<td>Obtaining Dan’s feedback on Professional Communication for Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN.11</td>
<td>08/07/2014</td>
<td>Dan’s surprise at receiving a 2.1 degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Notes included data from other means: emails, informal talks with students; talks with teachers and the LST are coded under relevant students’ names).

D. Codes for transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zihao</td>
<td>Z.T (Zihao Transcript)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ting</td>
<td>T.T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>W.T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>D.T</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Appendix 3 Drafts and feedback

A. A working framework: Chinese students’ academic coping (12/2014)

B. An extract of feedback on Chapter 9 by Mark Wyatt, my supervisor (11/05/2016)

“My own feeling is:

a) the key findings (based on cross-case analysis) need to stand out much more. Your comparison across cases has generated insights, which are often hidden away.

b) in places the literature gets in the way. One pattern that might work is: identify the key finding, explain in sufficient detail how cross case analysis leads you to this conclusion, relate this finding to the literature.

c) with regards the literature, I think it will be easier when you put a full draft together. You will be able to see where you first referred to social goals, for example, and refer readers back to this specific place, adding new detail about this concept where necessary, sometimes paraphrasing but not repeating too much”.

d) think carefully about the purpose of each section. The implications should be structured more dynamically as implications, for example. The practical dimensions need to be more obvious.

e) a model would be really useful. Try to develop one on the basis of your key insights”.

C. An excerpt of Zihao’s story v.1

With pair of white-rimmed glasses over a chubby face and short-cut hair with a small cone-shaped strand standing on top, Zihao seemed to demonstrate some uniqueness that the post-90 generation in China love to do (Hu, 2009). Zihao was able to have the opportunity to study in the UK thanks to his parents who worked at a profitable Chinese electric company. An only child in the family, he was also the first generation of university student. He said his parents gave him the freedom to make his own decisions, although he would consult some significant issues, like choosing an MA course with them. However, unlike some single children who tended to complain to their parents about the difficulties they encountered in the UK, which I gathered during the interviews, Zihao told me he preferred to tell them only good news in order not to worry them too much (Z1.1)

D. Tabled data: e.g., Wei’s three-year learning experiences themes extracted (2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>1st Year</th>
<th>2nd Year</th>
<th>3rd Year</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>TB1—Language problems (fear towards the exams, failed one; unaccepted in group work; patchwriting in essays, never get feedback (WN.12))</td>
<td>TB2—still</td>
<td>The hardest because of more subjects, voc.</td>
<td>TB1: Vocabulary Grammar—bottleneck Language classes useless EAP?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
<td>TB1—skip classes, did not visit learning support despite invitation; Surface learning (Rote learning: cramming for the exam; careless in writing) TB2—starting to tackle all four aspects of language (WI.1; WI.3) Effort (listening BBC to improve voc. And also reading Materials; keep a schedule) Other tutor’s support and direction (WI.3) Call phone company Use online dictionary GL5 teacher’s kind response(WI.3)</td>
<td>1. Effort: vocabulary, making use of feedback, Examination—read books repeatedly 2. Help-seeking pattern: avoid Chinese and integrate with home students for both content subjects, culture and language 3. Develop writing skills in reading books, using references, using feedback, discussing with teacher every teacher (WI.3; WN.12) (transition: Talking with B) many drafts, reading more, following</td>
<td>1. Shift attention from language learning to content study: No more vocabulary recitation, but still grammar improvement; Unsatisfied with language classes and appeared disinterested and unfocused. 2. More effort and More competence: in essay writing good argument through wide reading; references discussions with teachers on feedback; value and enjoy the process (WI.4) Read books for MA Presentations Effort, research, reference, evidence</td>
<td>If Year 1 he overcame the initial fear, it’s talking with another teacher in Year 2 that proved catalytic to his consistent engagement in discussions with teachers Transition—Year 2 (WN.12) where he improved his scores based on feedback, he started discussions with every teacher Year 3—continued discussions based on feedback and improve despite high scores Also low opinion of the uni because of: library service; teaching quality and wide-spread plagiarism but no detention (WN.8) Ambivalent attitude towards teachers: More futuristic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping style</td>
<td>Writing conventions and practice (W1.4)?</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotion-focused</td>
<td>Making friends with UK students—grammar and integration; dialect learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-focused</td>
<td>Transition from learning support and also gained some academic s.e. from passing TB1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-focused in TB2, Year 1</td>
<td>Combination of social goals, personal goals and perception of support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Self-efficacy</th>
<th>From little s.e. to a little after Xmas when he passed the assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More academic s.e., although not strong</td>
<td>Improved self-efficacy in TB1 to strong self-efficacy in self-improvement in hard work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social comparison initially but later self-comparison—indicate change of his goals in study, from performance to mastery</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predominant approaches to learning</th>
<th>From little s.e. to a little after Xmas when he passed the assessment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surface learning in TB1</td>
<td>Both strategic and deep learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic learning in TB2</td>
<td>Strategic and deep learning, but more deep learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social comparison initially but later self-comparison—indicate change of his goals in study, from performance to mastery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation to study</th>
<th>From little s.e. to a little after Xmas when he passed the assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social goal and performance goal, particularly in TB1, Year 1</td>
<td>Personal goal and social goal intertwined, performance goal and mastery goal combined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social goal mainly</td>
<td>Mastery goal: self-comparison; making use of feedback,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals changes with his improved competency in study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>goals</th>
<th>From little s.e. to a little after Xmas when he passed the assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoid failure</td>
<td>Self-improvement (in assessment, in authentic English, in grammar, in integration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved academic self-efficacy and appreciation of the environment prompted him to pursue high goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing factors</th>
<th>From little s.e. to a little after Xmas when he passed the assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social goal mainly</td>
<td>Supportive environment: learning support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive environment:</td>
<td>Supportive environment:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More identification with the UK education, personality and improved self-efficacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Items</td>
<td>1st Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression of his course and environment</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural influences</td>
<td>Effort and social goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Researcher name: Yu Hua
Supervisor name: Dr Mark Wyatt
Project title: Researching Chinese Students’ Language Learning Experiences in the UK
Brief summary of project

Recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of Chinese students studying in the UK. According to the British Embassy Beijing website, by Feb.2012 there were over 90,000 Chinese students studying in the UK, with over 70,000 undertaking higher education courses (British Embassy Beijing). While some Chinese students are highly motivated and can manage to adapt themselves to UK teaching after one term’s study, others find it difficult to integrate themselves into the UK learning environment. One direct consequence is that not only their academic study but also their wellbeing suffers. This situation has raised many concerns among educational researchers and much research has been carried out with the aim of addressing the problem and offering feasible solutions (Liu, 2002; Wen & Clement 2003; Clark & Gieve, 2006; Viv & An ,2006; Macintyre 2007; Ryan & Viete, 2009; Ryan & Slethaug, 2010; Coverdale-Jones 2009, 2013).

In general, although research carried so far has addressed some issues related to Chinese students from the perspectives of intercultural communications (Littlewood, 1999; Wen & Clement, 2003; Ryan & Viete, 2009; Wang, 2010), sociology (Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005; Wang, 2010 )and psychology (Huang, 2005) , there seems to be a limited discussion on these students’ motivation (Zhang, 2008). Also, most students from previous studies have been through a vigorous selection process by their institutions or the government and are guaranteed good jobs if they return to China after their study. Presumably, these students should have higher motivation in learning. However, concerning the increasing number of the self-financed undergraduates, very little work has been done. How do these
students adapt themselves to the UK learning environment, which has a strong feature of self-directed learning? How should the UK teachers be prepared to offer them maximal support so that they can gain autonomy and hence learn more effectively and become integrated into the British culture more easily?

It is likely that these Chinese students present different degrees of motivation, which can be related to Deci and Ryan’s Self-determination Theory (STD). SDT assumes that human beings have the tendency to be self-motivated or self-determined but social contexts can either facilitate or forestall the process. The differences are the result of the interaction between people’s inherent active nature and the social environments that either support or thwart that nature. Only when the three basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy and relatedness are met, do people experience satisfaction, happiness and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al, 2009).

Educational psychology has focused much attention to the self-determination continuum. Along this continuum, amotivation—extrinsic motivation (external regulation, introverted regulation, identified regulation and integrated regulation)—intrinsic motivation, only motivation that is closest to intrinsic motivation on the motivational continuum will lead to people’s well-being. Research findings also reveal that although the three basic needs are universal, individuals are likely to express their competence, autonomy, and relatedness differently within cultures that hold different values (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2007).

As one of the most influential theories on motivation (Dornyei, 2001, pp. 27-9), STD has been widely tested in the educational field. However, very few papers have addressed this issue from the perspective of the overseas Chinese students with the exception of Li Daguo, who did research on motivation in English learning in Chinese research students in the UK (Li, 2006). Specifically, despite the supports from UK universities in recent years, such as academic support, tutorial support and self-learning materials from online sources, some Chinese students seem to be unable to take advantage of them (Cross & Hitchcock, 2007). While it is true that highly motivated individuals make use of every opportunity to learn about the L2 culture, and tend to fair well, those who are only extrinsically motivated or even demotivated are unlikely to experience competence, relatedness and hence autonomy (Baker, 2004). The project is driven by the desire to find out the multiple factors contributing to the various learning behaviours of the Chinese students.

Methodology

Research questions

1. How do these Chinese learners adapt themselves to the UK learning environment?
2. What factors motivate/demotivate Chinese learners?
3. In what way does the Chinese culture predict their motivational propensity?
4. What are the suggestions for UK higher education?

Qualitative research will be adopted to obtain data with thick description (Holliday, 2002; Silverman, 2010). Main research methods would be class observations and interviews.

Classroom observations would enable the researcher to gather some first-hand data. As an overt non-participant, she will be able to take notes in order to gain more understanding of the research context as well as the students under study.

Several interviews would be conducted at three phases in order to gain a fuller picture: spring term in 2013, autumn term in 2013 and spring term in 2014. Each interview would last approximately 30 minutes. The time for the interviews will be carefully planned so that inconveniences on the part of the participants would be lowered as much as possible.

Semi-structured questions would be asked during the interviews. This may allow for rich data without losing sight of the research questions.
Volunteer Chinese participants would be selected from GL 5 classes and BC 1 at SLAS. In order to obtain sizable data, the researcher would select an initial number of 15 volunteers from the classes to be observed.

The whole process of research will strictly follow the ethics committee’s guidelines. Participants will be voluntary-based. They will be provided with enough information to decide whether to participate or not. The data collected will be treated with confidentiality and used for the present research only.

References:


UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Yu Hua (Researcher)          Dr Mark Wyatt (Supervisor)
University of Portsmouth      University of Portsmouth
School of Languages and Area Studies
Park Building
King Henry I Street
Portsmouth
Hampshire PO1 2DZ
Email: hua.yu@port.ac.uk

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: Researching Chinese Students’ Language Learning Experiences in the UK

REC Ref No:

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Before you decide I would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask me or my supervisor if there is anything that is not clear.

What is the purpose of the study?

I am undertaking research on the learning experiences of Chinese students coming to the UK for their undergraduate study. I am hope that my findings will help Chinese students to better adapt themselves to the UK higher education and also give UK teaching staff some guidance which might help improve their services for the students.

Why have I been invited?

You have been identified as a suitable participant for this research as you are one of the Chinese students who will stay in the university for 3 terms during which the research will be conducted. The research aims to gather around 15 Chinese participants in total and your results will be analysed along with other Chinese students.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation in the research is entirely voluntary, therefore it is up to you to decide to join the research and your withdrawal is possible. However, once your results are transcribed and analysed, withdrawal can no longer occur. If you agree to take part, we will then ask you to sign a consent form. The consent form will also guarantee your anonymity.

What will happen to me if I take part?
If you agree to participate, we will arrange a suitable time and place to do the interview. Before the interview, you can ask me questions that concern you. Once the questions are answered and you are happy to go through the interview process, I will ask you to sign a consent form. Then we will begin the interview. I will ask you some questions related to your learning experiences both in the past and in the UK. You can answer either in English or in Chinese. The interviews will be recorded for data analysis and will last approximately 30 minutes.

After each interview, I will transcribe/translate the interview. I can send you a copy of the transcription if you want. After you agree that the transcription is accurate, I will then analyse the data in order to identify some key themes. All audio recordings and data will be stored in a password-encrypted laptop so your information is kept safe.

**What will I have to do?**
All you need to do is to spend some time and talk with me honestly about the questions in the interviews either in Chinese or English.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**
The interview may take you some time, approximately 30 minutes each time. There might be several interviews each term.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**
Your participation in the research may help you reflect on the language strategies you are using as a language learner, which might help you improve your learning. Also, you will eventually do your own research project, and you might learn through the process of participating in this study. Furthermore, the research findings might benefit other Chinese students who may intend to study in the UK.

**Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**
Your data will be collected through class observations and interviews. The original observational notes will be kept in a locker, which only the researcher has access to. The recordings from the interviews will be transcribed and safely stored in a password-encrypted laptop along with the transcribed notes. Your names and any personal data (anything which might be used to identify you) will not be used in the transcripts and the thesis. All data gathered during the research will be destroyed after the research has been completed.

**What will happen if I don’t want to carry on with the study?**
Your participation is completely voluntary and withdrawal from the research is possible. However, once the interview data have been analysed, withdrawal can no longer occur.

**What if there is a problem?**
If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak to me or my supervisor. We will do our best to answer your questions (hua.yu@port.ac.uk; mark.wyatt@port.ac.uk). If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this by contacting the University Complaints Officer (02392 843642, Samantha Hill, University Complaints Officer).

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**
If you want, a summary of the research findings will be sent to you. Also, I will seek opportunities to publish the research and present it at conferences and other scholarly contexts. However, you would not be identified in any reports/publications.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**
The researcher is a self-funded PhD student.

**Who has reviewed the study?**
Research in the University of Portsmouth is looked at by independent group of people, called a Research Ethics Committee, to protect your interests. This study has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

**Further information and contact details**
For further information, please contact the researcher at hua.yu@port.ac.uk.

**Concluding statement**
Thank you for taking the time to read the information. You may keep this sheet for your records.
C. Participant invitation letter

Study Title: Researching Chinese Students’ Language Learning Experiences in the UK

Dear Potential Participant,

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study on your learning experiences in the UK.

My name is Yu Hua. I am a postgraduate student at School of Languages and Area Studies. I am under the supervision of Dr Wyatt and Dr Watkins. My research focus is Chinese students’ learning experiences in the UK.

As part of the research, I would like to interview you to gain a wider understanding of your learning experience. I would be happy to conduct the interview in either Chinese or English at a time and location convenient to you. Participation might help you reflect on the language strategies you are using as a language learner, which might help you improve your learning. Also, you will eventually do your own research project, and your participation in this study might help you to learn about the process. Furthermore, I hope that the research findings will benefit other Chinese students who may intend to study in the UK.

When the research is completed, I would be quite willing to share some of the research findings with you. Please feel assured that your data will be kept anonymously so nobody can identify you if the research findings are published.

Your participation is on a voluntary basis. All you need is to offer some of your free time to talk with me. You can withdraw at the early stage before the data is processed.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. In case of any doubt, please contact me at hua.yu@port.ac.uk.
D. Student consent form

Study Title: Researching Chinese Students’ Language Learning Experiences in the UK

Name of Researcher: Yu Hua

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet (dated __________) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason up to the point when the data are analysed.

3. I agree to my interview being audio recorded

4. I agree to being quoted verbatim

5. I agree to being an unnamed participant and quoted by coded names

x. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant: Date: Signature:

Name of Person taking consent: Date: Signature:

When completed: 1 for participant; 1 for researcher’s file

E. Ethical approval form

Appendix 6 Form UPR 16
REC reference number: 12/13:11
Please quote this number on all correspondence.

13th May 2013

Dear Yu,

Full Title of Study: Researching Chinese Students’ Language Learning Experiences in the UK

Documents reviewed:
Consent Form
Invitation Letter
Participant Information Sheet
Protocol

Further to our recent correspondence, this proposal was reviewed by The Research Ethics Committee of The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

I am pleased to tell you that the proposal was awarded a favourable ethical opinion by the committee subject to you making the minor amendments as suggested by the committee. (You are not required to submit these revised documents back to the committee before proceeding).

I would like to wish you well with your continuing research.

Kind regards,

FHSS FREC Chair
David Carpenter

Members participating in the review:

- David Carpenter
- Sukh Hamilton
- Richard Hitchcock
- Jane Winstone
## FORM UPR16

Research Ethics Review Checklist

Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Postgraduate Research Student Handbook for more information).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information</th>
<th>Student ID: up669025</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PGRS Name: Hua Yu (Hua Knight)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department: School of Languages and Area Studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Supervisor: Sherria Hoskins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start Date: 01/10/2012</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Study Mode and Route:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part-time</th>
<th>MPhil</th>
<th>MD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Professional Doctorate</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Title of Thesis:

Chinese undergraduate students’ academic coping and approaches to studying in the UK—a longitudinal study of four individual cases

### Thesis Word Count:

Approx. 9000 words

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If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University’s Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study. Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).

### UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:

(If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?</th>
<th>YES ☒ NO ☑</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?</td>
<td>YES ☑ NO ☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?</td>
<td>YES ☒ NO ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?</td>
<td>YES ☑ NO ☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?</td>
<td>YES ☒ NO ☑</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Candidate Statement:

I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)

**Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC):** 12/13:11

If you have *not* submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered ‘No’ to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signed (PGRS):</th>
<th>Date:</th>
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</table>

UPR16 – August 2015