

Chinese international students' wellbeing: Experiences of assessment in higher education

Citizenship, Social and
Economics Education
2023, Vol. 22(2) 118–133
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/14788047231194173
journals.sagepub.com/home/cse



Qiao Dai 

School of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

Abstract

While there is growing research identifying the academic and nonacademic challenges to the wellbeing of Chinese international students, there is little discussion about the differences in and challenges of the assessment they experience. This gap appears to come from a tacit assumption that assessment is universal worldwide, or that students will automatically learn strategies to deal with all the contrasts in assessment themselves. Based on personal experience, literature review and the interview responses of a group of Chinese international students' in the UK answers are sought to three research questions regarding their experiences. Academic hospitality is the theoretical underpinning of the research as this emphasises the bilateral collaboration between international students and higher education providers to support students' successful transition. The findings show that most participants were surprised and confused about the variety of assessment formats, the expected answers for assessment, and the autonomous learning they experienced in the UK, which were diverse from previous experience in China. While most Chinese students used similar strategies when they first encountered assessment in British universities, they developed new strategies when they realised the diverse expectations. These Chinese internationals needed ongoing support for assessment from the whole university.

Keywords

Chinese students, international students, internationalisation of assessment

Responding to growing concerns and its contemporary importance, this research explored Chinese international students' experience of assessment in the UK by considering three questions:

- (i) What are the differences in and challenges of assessment Chinese internationals experience in British universities?
- (ii) What are the strategies Chinese internationals adopt to meet the differences in and challenges of assessment in British universities?
- (iii) What is the institutional support for the differences in and challenges of assessment Chinese internationals require in British universities?

Corresponding author:

Qiao Dai, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK.
Email: 2358825d@student.gla.ac.uk

These research questions were addressed by examining relevant literature and by interviewing thirteen Chinese postgraduate students majoring in different subjects in a Scottish University. As one of the top 100 universities in the world, it has a growing international student cohort, with a considerable number of Chinese students. The institution prides itself on the international student support prior to students' arrival, during their stay, and after their graduation. However, like most British universities, there are no guidance materials and support for assessment specifically targeted at international students. In this way, most higher education institutions with a huge population of Chinese internationals appear to tacitly assume that assessment is universal worldwide, or that students will automatically learn strategies to deal with all the contrasts in assessment themselves.

This universal but non-evidence-based assumption can be doubted from my experience. As a Chinese student studying in the UK, I have perceived great differences in assessment between Chinese and British universities and even between the pre-Master's and Master's programmes in the same British university. Assessment, as one of the hottest topics among my peers, included perceived differences in formats, unfamiliarity with critical thinking, and even complaints about the non-consistency with curriculum, and subjective marking. Thus, the assumption of the universality of assessment or students' automatic adaptation may be taken for granted incorrectly. Despite the potential for subjective interpretation of findings, this research aims to provide a close examination of the differences in and challenges of assessment facing Chinese internationals from an insider's point of view.

Background

In education, it is widely accepted that assessment is an indispensable part of any effective education system or program (Bourke & Mentis, 2014). According to Mukminin (2012), assessment is defined as the wide variety of methods or tools that educators apply to assess, measure, and record information about students' learning, such as their academic preparation, learning progression, and learning needs. While others also refer to assessment as an ongoing process of gathering information on a daily basis to understand individual student's learning and needs (Norton et al., 2019). There is growing consensus in educational theories and practice that the main purpose of assessment is to improve students' learning and teachers' teaching according to the information it provides, rather than simply measurement and judgement (McDowell, 2010). Based on the core value of assessment for learning, Bourke and Mentis (2014) further suggest that assessment can not only diagnose and identify students' learning needs but also promote improvements across the education system in a cycle of continuous improvement. In this report, examinations (or exams) are understood as one of the most common methods or tools of assessment, usually in a standard setting, in a written format, and within the limited time. According to Chinese students, exams are the chief method of assessment they experience in the Chinese education system, from primary to tertiary education (*ibid*).

The outcomes of assessment in universities can be significant for international students, as these marks are closely related to resulting academic and career opportunities, influencing the degree classification and progression towards further studies, such as a postgraduate or PhD application (*ibid*). In addition, according to Bourdieu et al. (1977), cultural capital or habitus is misrecognized as individual academic achievement through hegemonic assessment. For instance, American and Chinese international students, who possess a distinct understanding of the conventions of academic writing from domestic students in the UK, can be disadvantaged if there is no additional support provided (Thompson et al., 2017).

Literature

While the majority of international students generally report a high level of satisfaction with their learning experience in British universities in large-scale surveys, small-scale studies with small amount of participants, identify various types of challenges facing international students in the UK (McMahon, 2017). These challenges can be categorised into four groups, namely social, linguistic, academic and psychological challenges (Adhikari, 2018). Here, it is vital to note that these categorisations are not mutually exclusive, but innately interconnected and intertwining to form the practical challenges international students undergoing (Amos & Rehorst, 2018). Therefore, the interacting effects will first be discussed, before focusing on various types of academic challenges, then the deficit stereotype of Chinese students will be challenged, before pointing out their growth and development, and finally, the gap of differences in and challenges of assessment will be identified.

Chinese international students' academic, psychological, social and language challenges appear to interact together (Andrade, 2017). Firstly, it is noteworthy that the academic challenges Chinese international students experience may bring psychological issues. According to a survey in British universities, a great number of Chinese internationals reported intensified anxiety, hopelessness, depression, and frustration (*ibid*). Echoed by Dorsett (2017), he further explains that international students who struggle with the academic challenges tend to spend numerous hours to advance their language and to prepare for classes and assessment, potentially entailing less socialisation, higher pressure and various psychological consequences. Also, the academic and social challenges intimately interact with each other and gain the most prominence among these international students (Bordovskaia et al., 2018). Regarding social challenges, there is evidence from numerous studies demonstrating that Chinese students practically interact less with host peers than socialising with their co-nationals and their relationship with host peers is largely superficial (Cantwell et al., 2008).

In spite of a variety of reasons for social challenges, like stereotypes of Chinese international students held by host peers, one significant difficulty reported by almost all Chinese internationals is the language barrier (*ibid*). The language capability, as one of the main concerns for international students, is considered as both the gateway to academic achievement and foundation to socialise with host peers and the host society (*ibid*). While all Chinese students meet the language required of studying their program (Dai et al., 2019), almost all of them believe that their lack of English competency builds a barrier to both their learning and social acculturation, especially the accent, and colloquialisms in host countries (Dorsett, 2017). Also, international students who pursued a Master's degree in the UK considered their inadequate English capability as one of the biggest impediments limiting their academic adaptation, like class discussion, comprehension of lectures, which might further entail psychological distress among them (*ibid*).

Chinese internationals, whose main aim to study abroad is academic achievement, consistently report academic challenges (Güvendir, 2018; Jin & Schneider, 2019), regarding pedagogical interaction, critical thinking, academic honesty, parental expectations, and so forth. Here, academic challenge refers to the fact that international students tend to undergo difficulties when they are exposed to the new academic environment in the host countries different from the learning environment in their home countries which they are familiar with (Heng, 2019). Indeed, there are countless studies conducted in different countries identifying various types of academic challenges international students undergo, especially Chinese internationals (*ibid*). Apart from the language barrier, the distinction in pedagogical interaction can also be challenging for Chinese internationals. Heng (2019) conducted a parallel mixed method study incorporating both Chinese students and British teachers, points out that even though students owed their lack of class participation to their limited linguistic capability, the teachers proposed that the cultural barrier would be more

likely to prevent their contribution in classroom practice. Heng (*ibid*) describes the cultural barriers as the different norms and ways of pedagogical interaction significantly influenced by the distinction between Chinese collectivism and British individualism. For instance, in the collectivist societies, there is mainly a hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, who tend to prevent themselves speaking and to bring harmony to class interactions to maintain strong ties in groups which they give priority to (*ibid*). Contradictorily, in the individualist culture, students prefer to speaking up and consider disagreement in class discussions positively because they tend to keep loose ties between individuals who give priority to themselves (*ibid*).

Critical reading and thinking are considered as one of the most difficult challenges among Chinese internationals, despite the fact that these skills are not easy for home students as well (Heng, 2017). Generally, critical thinking, reading and writing is an indispensable educational goal in most western countries across the education system (Huong et al., 2017). However, Chinese students were used to seeking “absolute truth” from and avoiding offending classics to pursue harmony, so they tend to feel confused when instructors do not single out important knowledge and not provide a standard answer, but rather expecting the students to explore and justify their own truth (Jin & Schneider, 2019). Another concern for international students would be the lack of correct understanding of academic honesty at their host universities (*ibid*). McMahon (2017) further explains that students from a collectivist society may be familiar with education featured by transmission, where knowledge is delivered and shared. Thus they put more emphasis on obtaining knowledge rather than worrying about the ownership of that knowledge. Therefore, they are largely used to studying together by copying information from authorities without any reference (*ibid*). These academic challenges can become more threatening when mixed with unrealistic parental expectations (McMahon, 2017).

More recent studies suggest that the above studies and practices hold a deficit of understanding for Chinese students, Chinese education and Confucianism, and also neglect the significance of individual, pedagogical, and psychological factors in international students’ adaptation. Some educational practitioners may hold a deficit thinking, which stereotypes Chinese students as uncritical, passive and dependent learners, and these incorrect stereotypes can influence teachers’ pedagogical practice which can entail profound impact on students’ self-identification, sense of belonging, and academic achievement (Heng, 2017). Instead, Ploner (2018) argues that this prevailing deficit perspective neglects international students’ distinct cultural background, and points out that the problem is not the learning strategy applied by students, but the teaching strategy adopted by instructors. This view is supported by a study disclosing that there were no noteworthy differences in learning strategies between Chinese and British students in British universities (McMahon, 2017). Therefore, McMahon (*ibid*) contends that students’ learning strategies are influenced by features of the educational context, such as pedagogy, rather than their cultural background.

While some scholars take diverse culture into consideration, they largely attribute the “passivity” of Chinese students to Chinese education, which is profoundly imbued with traditional Confucian values, belonging to the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) (Tu, 2018). Therefore, they try to justify their false stereotypes: Chinese education as merely a way to transfer cultural traditions; a hierarchy between teachers and students; and a collectivism aiming at a harmonious relationship, which is contradictory to modern Western education, predominantly focusing on autonomy in learning, critical thinking and active participation in class (*ibid*). Nevertheless, this simplistic view does not depict the full image of CHC (*ibid*). For instance, regarding the hierarchic relation between teachers and students, there is the reciprocity of caring, concern and cherishing between them (Dai et al., 2019). Also, in transmissive education, substantial memorisation and intensive recitation depend largely on reflective thinking and independent interpretation to internalise knowledge and put it into practice (*ibid*). Hence, It is the combination of all the features that characterise

student learning in the Confucian heritage. A comparative study also found that Chinese internationals' adaptation varied dramatically between individuals, and at different stages of studying abroad (Andrade, 2017). Thus, the personal, pedagogical and psychological features, like their cultural background, all play significant roles in students' adaptation, self-identification and academic success (*ibid*). Hence, the influence of cultural and educational backgrounds in international students' academic adjustment should not be overemphasised.

Although Chinese international students report various types of challenges, almost all of them enjoy their experience of studying abroad; consider the studying experience as a critical phase for their identity construction; and achieve satisfactory levels of academic success (*ibid*). Heng (2019) adopts a developmental perspective, maintaining that students' academic adaptation tends to be a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a static image, incorporating not only challenges but also changes and development. This process is not smooth and linear, but rather cyclic and continuous, revealing the complexities of students' adjustment (*ibid*). From this positive perspective, the academic challenges they encounter are potentially beneficial to their academic success in the future (Wu & Hammond, 2011). In this generally positive process of academic adaptation over time, students' motivation, teachers' re-contextualised pedagogy and proper teacher-student relationship all play a role (Thompson et al., 2017).

Among the limited studies of the differences in assessment international students experience, surveys of international students in a British university shows that while exams looked similar, students perceived significant differences between the exams they undertook in their home countries and those in Britain. Specifically, participants from France, China and the US found distinctions in exams concerning the application of citation, application of examples, level of inclusion of personal view, the extent of detail, and a loose connection between course content and exam content (*ibid*). As a result, international students felt extremely afraid of exams, as they considered themselves unused to the assessment practices, and suggested that it was demanding to express themselves clearly in academic English in the limited time (Tu, 2018). The exam environment might also be unfamiliar to international students, potentially entailing more stress for exams under considerable time pressure (*ibid*). For example, even small factors, like a ban on using the personal watch, could have a significant impact on student's performance (Heng, 2017).

Also, the definition of cheating might have a different meaning in the UK, so this could be puzzling for international students coming from another culture. Thus, international students have to cope with this unfamiliar exam environment under considerable time pressure, which may explain the disappointment of marks among them. A recent study demonstrated that students who were native speakers of English performed better than ESL students, especially in exams of more discursive responses (*ibid*). Together with the rigour of UK academic English, Chinese international students can be further disadvantaged in a timed exam. Therefore, Chinese international students' experience of assessment in the UK, especially the differences and challenges, is worth studied.

Chinese internationals tend to actively develop new learning strategies to cope with challenges they face, but these strategies sometimes can be desperate. A longitudinal study found that while they might adopt traditional learning strategies, like memorisation, they also learnt from other students and tutors to develop new learning approaches (Dai et al., 2019). Echoed by Vygotsky, his sociocultural theory proposes an active interaction between learning strategies and students' cultural and social environment and argues that students may change their learning approaches in interaction with the changing cultural environment, like learning materials or classroom tasks (Ploner, 2018). In this way, the focus moves from the challenges facing international students to the active process in which they develop their learning approaches and strategies to manage those challenges over time. As Chinese international students encounter various challenges, they often perceive that

it is necessary for them to catch up with others regarding knowledge and skills to achieve academic success (*ibid*). However, this does not indicate that they lag behind other learners academically, but rather, they may under-evaluate themselves (Andrade, 2017). Therefore, those Chinese internationals believe they have to work hard to close the gap for better academic adaptation in the UK, but they are not sure how to change their learning approaches and strategies correspondingly (Ploner, 2018). In this situation, some of them may resort to desperate methods, like reading sources in Chinese, writing assignments in Chinese before translating into English by using translation instruments online (*ibid*).

Positively, Chinese internationals could meet academic demands without full adaptation to the new environment as they form their own social network, especially the ‘international student culture’, considered as the most effective strategy. Specifically, students believe that support from their co-national friends plays an indispensable role in their academic, psychological, and social adaptation (Cantwell et al., 2008). Concerning academic support, they value greatly their interaction with British instructors and other international students, particularly, teachers’ encouragement and effective feedback as the most constructive support (Andrade, 2017). According to Tu (2018), Chinese international students seem more likely to ask other international students for academic support than their home peers since they deliberately make efforts to develop their language skills.

Ploner (2018) contends that what these international students adapt to is not the host culture, but rather an ‘international student culture’, which is featured by its prevalent use of English, the inclusion of students of various nationalities, and a shared aim of achieving academic success. This international student culture is a hybrid group, but not a marginalised or excluded one (*ibid*). These students from different background connect with each other, and also keep in touch with their domestic networks on the internet, but the majority of them have few experience and connection in the host culture. McMahon (2017) further explains that students are able to adapt to this international culture due to a combination of proper preparation, academic success, social connection and effective strategies for English development. Therefore, this international culture does not pre-exist but is constructed and continually developed by international students (*ibid*). However, another study reveals that while the strong network is the chief response to the challenges those students facing, they sometimes share poor skills and knowledge with each other (Dorsett, 2017).

In the few studies discussing the assessment strategies international students adopt, while they perceive significant distinction in exams between their home countries and Britain, almost all respondents used the same strategies they used previously to prepare for the exams. This is because practically all guides on examinations are provided to all students, but not separately for international students, so the universal guidance may implicitly tell international students that they should use the same preparation strategies (Heng, 2017). Further explain that as students prepare in the same manner for what they believed to be universal question types, the study displays that expectations of the answer to these question types were certainly not the same. And this mismatch may affect many international students’ performances and explains their disappointment of marks, especially those who have endeavoured to prepare for the assessment (*ibid*). Hence, the assessment strategies Chinese international students employ in British universities are worth researched.

While numerous studies have examined the challenges experienced by and strategies adopted by Chinese internationals, few ask them for ideas about how tertiary educational communities can support their experience of studying abroad (Dorsett, 2017). This academic gap demonstrates that those education institutions hold a neo-colonialist perspective, suggesting the responsibility for institutions is to teach international students but not learn from them and leave the accountability to students to adapt to the new environment (McMahon, 2017). However, critics may contend that

Chinese internationals who resort to the institutional support seem dependent and passive (*ibid*). This misconception can be refuted by the fact that most of them take the initiative and endeavour to adapt to the academic and social environment in host countries (Thompson et al., 2017). Nevertheless, they tend to be silenced by invisible barriers, hidden curriculum, like unspoken classroom norms, and their silence may be misunderstood as indifferences or passivity towards the new environment (*ibid*). In this situation, tertiary education institutions can further silence international students by not asking for their advice on their desired support (Dorsett, 2017). Thus, it is crucial to firstly listen to Chinese international students about how the college community can better support their transition.

Generally, most Chinese internationals possess a holistic perspective, valuing the significant support from the whole college community, especially teachers' pedagogy, curriculum content, student services, academic and language support. Most essentially, institutions themselves have to shed their neo-colonialist mindset and involve international students in the decision-making process (Dorsett, 2017). In this ongoing process, firstly, it is fundamental for the education institutions to develop an inclusive awareness across all members of the college community accompanied by practical actions, like increasing meaningful interaction among unfamiliar groups (Güvendir, 2018). Then, it is significant for teachers to embrace "culturally relevant pedagogy", which is an approach that views students of diverse background as valuable resources, and prioritises impartial and reciprocal social relationships, and values thoughtful scaffolding in learners' learning (*ibid*). Here, institutions' provision of training and resources to support teachers is also indispensable (*ibid*). Besides, the curriculum design should incorporate topics addressing global issues to include students of diverse background into classroom interaction (Tu, 2018). Furthermore, this holistic perspective also demands international student services and academic support to deconstruct the hidden norms (*ibid*). Lastly, Chinese internationals emphasises their desires of language support, which may be achieved by well-arranged writing centres, continuous workshops of academic writing, opportunities to learn conversational English, including colloquialisms, etc. (Ploner, 2018).

Apart from international student advice, practical programs and staff voices also argue for the inclusion of international students, which can only be achieved by a combination of small actions and institutional reform. Essentially, it is suggested that higher education institutions need to embrace the idea of inclusive education, referring to the equitable opportunity of access to, participation in, and achievement in schooling for all regardless of individual background (Andrade, 2017). Thus, regarding small actions to support the inclusion of international students, firstly, it is advisable to expand orientations to include various types of information, such as videos and social media, before students' arrival and during their stay (Adhikari, 2018). For instance, Iowa State's First-Year program is a 16-week compulsory course for first-year international undergraduates incorporating a wide range of information (*ibid*). Secondly, universities should not only focus on the establishment of campus resources, like professors, staff, academic and student support services, and writing centres, but also the motivation of and help for students to use them effectively (*ibid*). This is because Chinese internationals are used to resorting to their peers for help rather than the campus resources (Tu, 2018).

Thirdly, as peer support is the main source of help for international students, it is important for Universities to find creative peer modes to ensure good practice shared within international students' communities, such as the peer-assisted learning schemes in British universities (*ibid*). Most importantly, while small steps in different domains are significant, institutional reform is considered as the essence for the true inclusion of international students and the true internationalisation of British higher education, otherwise ending up in commercialised education through the advertisement of international programs (Dorsett, 2017). In this process of true internationalisation, all the academic

curriculum, teacher pedagogical practice and delivery of student services need substantial reform (*ibid*). The core value held by institutions is that international students are talented individuals who bring diversity to their campuses, so they can be used as valuable resources contributing to knowledge production and cultural diversity, which will further enhance the institution community, like intercultural competence of students and staff, improved pedagogy of instructors, and student service of universities (Dai et al., 2019).

Finally, while there is significant literature exploring and identifying effective measures higher education institutions can take to support Chinese internationals' successful transition, there is little discussion about the institutional support for the challenging assessment they experience. These very few studies leave all the accountability for assessment support to the lecturers' interventions (Adhikari, 2018), including: clarification of expected answers and assessment criteria, encouragement for discussion of assessment differences and confusion, and provision of feedback on the assessment-like tasks as early as possible (Heng, 2019). These measures can explore and disclose the hidden distinction of national assessment, and potentially help international students better prepare for and perform better in assessment (*ibid*). Indeed, these interventions are not designed to support international students specifically, so they may not address their essential concerns. Therefore, the institutional support for the challenges of assessment Chinese internationals experience is worth researched.

The majority of existing studies and practice, just like the discussed above, adopt an assimilationist approach. This deficit model, firstly, holds that the reason why international students experience various challenges are due to their lack of the required capabilities to cope with the new environment, so the responsibility falls on international students only to adapt to the host environments (Andrade, 2017). This approach also employs an oversimplified perspective to view international students and their learning approaches and possesses false stereotypes that CHC and Chinese education are contradictory to Western values and Western educational practice (*ibid*). Hence, most education institutions in the UK adopting the assimilationist approach endeavour to support international students' smooth transition, through induction programs, welcome events, guided tours, writing centres and peer mentors, etc.

Nevertheless, this research is developed on the concept of "academic hospitality" aiming to develop a reciprocal relationship between academic "hosts" and "guests" (Dorsett, 2017). Firstly, unlike the image of passive students depicted in the assimilationist approach, academic hospitality proposes a positive and active transition of international students, like personal and academic development (*ibid*). Secondly, "hospitality" refers to a set of beliefs and exercises to build a welcoming, reciprocal and trustworthy relationship with others (McMahon, 2017). Therefore, this approach emphasises bridging the seemingly contradictory "host" and "guest" cultures to develop a more nuanced and interactive approach of international students education (*ibid*). Thirdly, students agree that ritualistic actions of welcome and courtesy do play a role in their successful transition (Andrade, 2017), like what the institutions holding the assimilationist approach normally do. However, they also contend that true hospitality goes beyond those rituals to an ongoing process penetrating all respects of academic life, emphasising openness and reciprocity to others through sharing and receiving (*ibid*). For instance, fostering meaningful conversations between individuals of diverse background to challenge established parochialism and develop a deeper recognition of, acceptance of, and respect for multiple identities, various cultures and diverse ways of knowledge production (Heng, 2017).

Research Design

This research adopted an exploratory research design, characterised by flexible and tentative investigations to gain insights into a relatively under-researched area, which in this case was the differences in and challenges of assessment encountered by international students.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect qualitative data of assessment experienced by Chinese students'. Thirteen Chinese postgraduates were interviewed individually in English, lasting from 12 to 17 min each under conditions that complied with ethical considerations.

After transcription of all interviews, the qualitative data were manually analysed using deductive coding based on the interview guide and also inductive coding based on the interview transcript.

This qualitative research embraced the idea that the meanings attached to experience were co-constructed by participants and the researcher, so the findings were inevitably subjective and value-laden (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, the researchers took efforts to minimise research bias and maximise the trustworthiness and authenticity of the qualitative data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017), including discussion and clarification with the participants about the researcher's interpretation, the same researcher across interviews, avoiding leading questions, considerable direct quotations from interviewees, whose significant demographical information was provided, etc.

Discussion

Most Chinese students in this research were surprised and even confused about the variety of assessment formats they experienced in the UK, especially the oral assessment and group work. However, the current findings do not support the previous studies, which suggest that the assessment formats in the UK were the same as the international students experienced in their home countries. One of the most significant reasons for the distinct outcome may be that adopted a restricted definition of assessment, which was the traditional understanding of examinations, mostly in written forms within the limited time, so could be significantly different from the definition of assessment in this current research. Besides, the participants in that study incorporating not only Chinese internationals but also students from France and the US (*ibid*), whose previous experience of assessment were diverse.

Interviewees in this research also found that, when formats were familiar to them, the expected answers to the assessment in British universities were largely diverse from their previous experience. In the same vein, findings from questionnaires and in-depth interviews with international students show that, while exams looked similar, they perceived significant differences between the exams they undertook in their home countries and those in the UK immediately after their first encounter with the examinations in British universities (*ibid*).

All Chinese internationals in this current research believed that expressing themselves in academic English under time pressure or word limit was most challenging. This finding is consistent with that of Dorsett (2017) who found that international students who pursued a Master's degree in the UK considered their inadequate English capability as one of the biggest impediments limiting their academic adaptation. Also, Tu (2018) explained that international students were extremely afraid of exams since they thought that the UK academic English was exceptionally rigorous and themselves incapable of expressing thoughts clearly in limited time. While British students also consider the academic language challenging, Chinese internationals can be further disadvantaged if there is no specific support for them (*ibid*).

Specific illustrations of linguistic challenges mentioned by the participants in current research included the acceptable extent of inclusion of personal views, applications of concrete examples, and correct referencing to avoid plagiarism. Here, plagiarism is connected to academic honesty at their host universities, as one of the main concern and confusion for international students (Jin & Schneider, 2019). McMahon (2017) clarified that Chinese students might be in danger of plagiarism even unintentionally since they might be used to delivering and sharing knowledge in a transmissive education, so they put more emphasis on obtaining knowledge rather than worrying

about the ownership of that knowledge. Therefore, they were largely used to studying together by copying information from authorities without any reference (*ibid*).

All interviewees in this research agreed that while the demonstration of critical thinking skills was a significant requirement in all assessments in postgraduate study, none of them was confident enough to apply critical thinking, reading and writing to various types of assessments in the UK. In line with that, Heng (2017) shows that critical reading and thinking are considered as one of the most difficult challenges among Chinese internationals, despite the fact that these skills are not easy for home students as well. Jin and Schneider (2019) explain this challenge from a culturalist view. They argue that Chinese students were used to seeking “absolute truth” from and avoiding offending classics to pursue harmony, so they tend to feel confused when British instructors do not single out important knowledge and do not provide a standard answer, but rather expecting the students to explore and justify their own truth (*ibid*).

Most students interviewed felt unaccustomed to the autonomy on the exam preparation and coursework writing in British universities, such as the wide scope of sources for revision. As a result, some of them fell the exams or failed to submit their coursework within the deadline. To explain their academic failure, firstly, Heng (2017) argues that some educational practitioners may hold a deficit stereotype of Chinese students as uncritical, passive and dependent learners, and these incorrect stereotypes can influence teachers’ pedagogical practice entailing profound impact on students’ academic achievement. However, Ploner (2018) argues that this prevailing deficit perspective neglects international students’ distinct cultural background, and points out that the students’ academic failure is not due to the learning strategy applied by students, but the teaching strategy adopted by instructors. While some scholars take diverse culture into consideration, they largely attribute the “passivity” of Chinese students to Chinese transmissive education and CHC, which they stereotype as contradictory to the autonomous learning, critical thinking in modern Western education (Tu, 2018).

Nevertheless, this simplistic view is refuted by the comprehensive understanding of transmissive education, which is defined by not only substantial memorisation and intensive recitation, but more significantly the reflective thinking and independent interpretation to internalise knowledge and put it into practice (*ibid*). The findings of this research can further demonstrate the above stereotypes of Chinese students and Chinese education can be mistaken. This research showed that while those direct entry postgraduates found autonomous learning challenging, those Chinese students who had studied in the UK, including gaining a Bachelor’s degree or finishing a pre-Master program, were actually accustomed to, enjoyed and benefited from the autonomy on their learning largely. Consistently, findings from a comparative study show that Chinese internationals’ academic adaptation varied dramatically between individuals, and at different stages of studying abroad (Andrade, 2017). Andrade (*ibid*) further noted that the personal, pedagogical and psychological features, like the cultural background, all play significant roles in students’ academic success. That is to say, the cultural and educational background of Chinese internationals should not be overemphasised and overgeneralised.

This research shows that despite the fact that these Chinese internationals identified various challenges of assessment, there was a clear process of improvement among all interviewees, such as growing familiarity with and confidence in the different assessment formats, clarity of the expected answers, and more advanced linguistic capability. This is in line with the study of Andrade (2017), showing that while Chinese international students experienced academic challenges, the majority of them achieved satisfactory levels of academic success at the end. However, this current research also reveals a non-negligible fact that a few Chinese internationals failed assessments and reported suffering from depression. This is in accord with a survey in British universities, identifying intensified anxiety, hopelessness, depression, and frustration resulting from a combination of academic

challenges and unrealistic parental expectations among a great number of Chinese internationals (Dorsett, 2017).

In general, the research findings support and extend Heng's (2019) developmental perspective, maintaining that students' academic adaptation tends to be a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a static image, incorporating not only challenges but also changes and development. This research may be helpful to extend this developmental perspective to the specific domain of assessment challenges and growth. Therefore, the assessment challenges and even psychological consequences can be considered from this positive perspective, as part of the growing process, which is not smooth and linear, but rather cyclic and continuous (*ibid*), so these difficulties they encounter are potentially beneficial to their academic success in the future (Wu & Hammond, 2011). This does not mean to ignore the psychological consequences but rather to perceive them positively and actively interact with them.

While the assessment formats were diverse from the formats in Chinese universities, most Chinese students used similar strategies when they first encountered the assessment in British universities, and the influence on their performance varied among individuals. This finding echoed that of Heng (2017), who found that almost all international students used the same strategies they used previously to prepare for the assessment, as practically all guides on examinations are provided to all students, but not separately for international students, so the universal guidance may implicitly tell international students that they should use the same preparation strategies. Also revealed in their study that while students prepared in the same manner for what they believed to be universal question types, the expected answers to these question types were certainly not the same. This mismatch can influence those students' academic performances and may explain their disappointment of marks, especially those who endeavoured to prepare for the assessment (*ibid*).

The significance of autonomous learning in British universities had a great impact on interviewees' preparation strategies and academic performance. Those postgraduates suggested that they practically made less use of the revision sources they were used to in Chinese universities, such as lecture notes and textbook, most of which were all provided by teachers, but they made significantly more use of the recommended reading and resources searched by themselves. This change of strategies can be explained by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, maintaining that students may change their learning approaches in interaction with the changing cultural environment, like learning materials or classroom tasks (Ploner, 2018). Specifically, those international students experienced assessment diverse from that in China, so they changed and developed new strategies to meet the new requirement of assessment in British universities.

While most Chinese students studied alone in their home country, all of them considered social support as the main source and strategy to meet the challenging assessment, including their co-nationals, other international students and tutors. The current findings broadly support the idea that the formation of "international student culture" is considered as the most effective strategy Chinese internationals adopt to meet academic demands without full adaptation to the new environment (Cantwell et al., 2008). The postgraduates in this research also pointed out that their co-national friends and other international students were their primary support, even for the individual assessment.

Thus, the current results support the previous findings of the significant role of co-national friends in their successful adaptation, and specify to assessment support precisely. In general, all students in this research thought their peer support positively. Conversely, Dorsett (2017) revealed that while the strong network was the chief response to the challenges international students facing, they sometimes shared poor skills and knowledge with each other. The reason why the absence of poor-knowledge sharing in current research might be the self-report essence of the interviews, so it is possible for students to share poor skills unconsciously. This current research, also supporting the

study conducted by Andrade (2017), revealed that while all students considered tutors' effective feedback as the most conducive support, not all of them were willing to seek support from their lecturers and tutors. Specifically, interviewees, who had studied in the UK, regardless of subjects, tended to ask more help from teachers, compared to the direct entry postgraduates.

Apart from other positive strategies like time-management skills and making realistic plans, some students in current research also recognised that they adopted desperate methods in their assessments, such as reading and writing in Chinese, and overuse of online translation tools. Andrade (2017) conducted a study and explained that those Chinese internationals tended to underestimate themselves, so they believed that they had to work hard to close the academic gap between them and other students. However, they were not sure how to change their learning approaches and strategies correspondingly, so some of them might resort to desperate methods for better academic performance (Ploner, 2018). This explanation can be conducive to understanding that the participants adopted desperate strategies to meet the challenges of assessment, even though they knew the methods were not beneficial in the long run.

Whether these Chinese internationals adopted desperate or positive strategies, all interviewees in current research displayed obvious changes in their strategies and approaches to meet the assessment challenges over time. In this process, they experienced assessment differences and challenges; they evaluated their strategies with the support from peers and tutors; they made a continuous effort to refine their methods aiming at better academic performance, such as application of mind maps, knowledge structures, and a variety of sources online. These findings also support the above mentioned Heng's (2019) developmental perspective and specify it to assessment strategies. Thus, students' academic adaptation can also be considered as a dynamic, ongoing process of developing new strategies to meet the challenging assessments in a changing academic environment. Also, in accordance with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Ploner, 2018), this perspective moves the focus from the challenges facing international students to the active process in which they develop their learning approaches and strategies to manage those challenges over time.

Academic hospitality is the theoretical underpinning and also the rationale of the structure of this research. Thus, apart from students' effort and strategies, the institutional responsibility and actions are also indispensable to support international students to cope with the demanding assessment, and finally, develop reciprocity together with them. Also, academic hospitality, as a core value, can benefit not only students' academic achievement considerably, but also their successful transition, psychological wellbeing and socialisation (Andrade, 2017). However, few ask international students' for ideas about how tertiary educational communities can support their experience of assessment, so these institutions can further silence international students by not asking for their advice on their desired support (Dorsett, 2017). In this situation, participants in the current research were pleased to have their voice heard, which might be conducive for institutional support for those international students.

Generally, interviewees were in need of support for assessment from the whole university, ranging from lecturers, tutors, academic services to international student services, and they emphasised that this should be an ongoing process, rather than a one-off. This whole-university support for assessment is in agreement with the holistic perspective of academic support, arguing that most Chinese internationals value the importance of support from the whole college community, especially teachers' pedagogy, curriculum content, student services, academic and language support (Tu, 2018). This holistic perspective also demands international student services and academic support to deconstruct the hidden norms (*ibid*), which can be understood as the expected answers and academic conventions significant in the assessment in host countries. Besides, the findings are also in line with the idea of inclusive education, referring to the equitable opportunity of access to, participation in, and achievement in schooling for all regardless of individual background (Andrade, 2017). Thus, it is

significant for the whole university to support the assessment experience, which is inseparable from academic achievement if they want to truly include international students.

Among the specific institutional support for assessment, whether in forms of special guidance, lectures, workshops and tutorials, most Chinese internationals highlighted the clarification of expected answers and assessment criteria, which they were still confused after they received their final marks, such as the extent of inclusion of personal views. Regarding the unfamiliar format, some of them demanded the provision of samples and practical guidance prior to their formal assessment. With regard to familiar formats, like timed exams or essay, students thought a chance of mock exam or formative assessment with effective feedback from tutors and peers would benefit them considerably. In accordance with the present results, Heng (2019) also identified this desired support and explained that these measures could explore and disclose the hidden distinction of national assessment, and potentially help international students better prepare for and perform better in assessment (*ibid*). However, the only difference is that Heng (2019) largely leave accountability of assessment support to the teachers only. Controversially, the current findings showed students' preference of whole-university effort, and more significantly, students also noted that the university needed to provide training for the teaching staff as well, in terms of both their awareness and practical actions.

Linguistic support was mentioned by all and considered as the most imperative support by the majority of interviewees, both in written and oral forms, including strategies and methods to find appropriate academic sources, practical guidance on critical thinking, reading and writing, correct referencing and effective paraphrasing. A rich combination of workshops, lectures, writing centres, and various sources on Moodle is also recommended to cater for individual preference. This is supported by the significant finding from a longitudinal study conducted by Ploner (2018) who found that the linguistic capability of Chinese internationals demonstrated in essays and presentations improved after the institutional active support and organisation opportunities to learn conversational English, etc. However, students in this research possessed mixed ideas of whether linguistic support should be a compulsory course. In line with previous studies, some participants experienced anxiety and even depression due to the challenging assessment (Dorsett, 2017). Thus, participants advised the university to provide more pressure-reducing activities throughout the academic year, as their deadline of submission of coursework were not in the traditional revision time.

Last but not least, almost all Chinese internationals advised universities not only to focus on the establishment of campus resources, like professors, staff, academic and student support services, and writing centres, but also to devote energy to the motivation of international students and help for them to use resources effectively. This finding is similar to the results from Adhikari (2018) and is also explained by Tu (2018), who argues that Chinese internationals are used to resorting to their peers for help rather than the campus resources. This explanation can be true for some participants in current research, as some also favoured the group revision and mentoring program provided by universities. In the same vein, Tu (2018) highlights the importance for universities to find creative modes to ensure good practice shared within international students' communities since peer support is the main source of help for Chinese internationals (*ibid*).

Overall, a combination of institutional reforms, small actions in the whole university, together with an ongoing motivation of students to use campus resources is considered essential for the true inclusion of international students and the true internationalization of British higher education, otherwise ending up in commercialized education through the advertisement of international programs (Dorsett, 2017).

Conclusions

Most Chinese students in this research were surprised and confused about the variety of assessment formats they experienced in the UK, especially the oral assessment and group work. Even when

formats were familiar to them, the expected answers to the assessment were largely diverse from their previous experience. Specifically, all participants believed that expressing themselves in academic English under time pressure or word limit was the most challenging, such as the acceptable extent of inclusion of personal views, applications of concrete examples, and correct referencing to avoid plagiarism. None of them was confident enough to apply critical thinking, reading and writing to various types of assessments in the UK. Also, most students felt unaccustomed to the autonomy on the exam preparation and coursework writing, so some of them failed in the assessment and might suffer from depression. To explain their academic failure, a deficit stereotype of Chinese students is refuted by the comprehensive understanding of Chinese transmissive education and empirical findings. This research, in line with Heng's (2019) developmental perspective, showed that while they identified various challenges of assessment, there was a clear process of improvement among all interviewees, such as growing familiarity with and confidence in the different assessment formats, clarity of the expected answers, and more advanced linguistic capability.

Concerning assessment, most Chinese students used similar strategies when they first encountered assessment in British universities, and the influence on their performance varied among individuals. However, supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Ploner, 2018), they developed new strategies when they realized the diverse expectations. Firstly, the significance of autonomous learning in British universities had a great impact on their preparation strategies and academic performance, such as significantly more use of the recommended reading and resources searched by themselves compared to their previous experience in China. Secondly, while most of them studied alone in Chinese universities, all of them considered social support as the main source and strategy to meet the challenging assessment in the UK, including their co-nationals, other internationals and tutors. Thirdly, apart from other positive strategies like time-management skills and making realistic plans, some students also adopted desperate methods in their assessments, like reading and writing in Chinese, and overuse of online translation tools. Lastly, from Heng's (2019) developmental perspective, all interviewees displayed obvious changes in their strategies and approaches to meet the assessment challenges over time.

In terms of institutional support, interviewees suggested ongoing support for assessment from the whole university, ranging from lecturers, tutors, academic services to international student services. Among the specific institutional support in forms of special guidance, lectures, workshops and tutorials, most Chinese internationals highlighted the clarification of expected answers and assessment criteria, such as the extent of inclusion of personal views. Some student also suggested the provision of samples of and practical guidance on the unfamiliar format, and some thought mock exams or formative assessments with effective feedback from tutors and peers would benefit them considerably. Linguistic support in a combination of rich forms was mentioned by all and considered as the most imperative support, including strategies and methods to find appropriate academic sources, practical guidance on critical thinking, reading and writing, correct referencing and effective paraphrasing. Also, students recommended training for the teaching staff and the provision of pressure-reducing activities throughout the academic year. Finally, almost all of them advised universities not only to focus on the establishment of campus resources, but also to devote energy to the motivation of international students and help for them to use resources effectively, such as the group revision and mentoring program provided by universities to ensure good practice shared among students.

The self-report nature, the purposive sampling strategy, small sample size, and specific participant contexts indicate that the current findings are not generalisable. Still, the findings of this exploratory research can generate provisional arguments helpful to develop further quantitative studies with larger numbers of students from different countries, such as the possible correlation between the distinction in assessment and their academic performance. Finally, while the researcher

took effort to minimise research bias, this qualitative research embraced an interpretivist epistemology, so the findings were inevitably subjective and value-laden (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Thus, it is advisable that future studies carefully distinguish what their international students' specific challenges are and how to support them. This way, 'institutions are involving international students in conversations with them, not about them' (Heng, 2017: 847).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Qiao Dai  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0525-2149>

References

- Adhikari S (2018) Beyond Culture: Helping International Students Avoid Plagiarism. *Journal of International Students*. [Online] 8(1): 375–388.
- Amos Y and Rehorst N (2018) Making Interactions Between Domestic and International Students Meaningful. *Journal of International Students*. [Online] 8(3): 1346–1354.
- Andrade M (2017) Institutional policies and practices for admitting, assessing, and tracking international students. *Journal of International Students*. [Online] 7(1): 1–VI.
- Bordovskaia N, Anderson C, Bochkina N, et al. (2018) The adaptive capabilities of Chinese students studying in Chinese. *British and Russian Universities. International Journal of Higher Education*. [Online] 7(4): 1.
- Bourdieu P, et al. (1977) *Education, society and culture*. Trans. Nice Richard. London: Sage Publications.
- Bourke R and Mentis M (2014) An assessment framework for inclusive education: Integrating assessment approaches. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*. [Online] 21(4): 384–397.
- Bryman A and Bell E (2011) *Business research methods*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Cantwell B, Luca S and Lee J (2008) Exploring the orientations of international students in Mexico: Differences by region of origin. *Higher Education*. [Online] 57(3): 335–354.
- Dai K, Matthews K and Reyes V (2019) Chinese Students' assessment and learning experiences in a transnational higher education programme. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. [Online] 45(2): 1–12.
- Dorsett J (2017) High hopes: International student expectations for studying in the United States. *New Directions for Student Services*. [Online] 2017(158): 9–21.
- Güvendir M (2018) The relation of an international student center's orientation training sessions with international Students' achievement and integration to university. *Journal of International Students*. [Online] 8(2): 843–860.
- Heng T (2017) Voices of Chinese international students in USA colleges: 'I want to tell them that ...'. *Studies in Higher Education*. [Online] 42(5): 833–850.
- Heng T (2019) Understanding the Heterogeneity of International Students' Experiences: A Case Study of Chinese International Students in U.S. Universities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. [Online] 23(5): 607–623.
- Huong L, Koo F, Arambewela R, et al. (2017) Voices of dissent: Unpacking Vietnamese international student experience. *International Journal of Educational Management*. [Online] 31(3): 280–292.
- Jin L and Schneider J (2019) Faculty views on international students: A survey study. *Journal of International Students*. [Online] 9(1): 84–96.

- Kivunja C and Kuyini A (2017) Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education* 6(5): 26.
- McDowell L (2010) Challenging assessment? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. [Online] 35(3): 263–264.
- McMahon P (2017) ‘Making the grade’: A grounded theory explaining the student experience of Asian and middle-eastern postgraduates in a British university. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. [Online] 40(1): 34–47.
- Mukminin A (2012) Acculturative experiences among Indonesian graduate students in US higher education: Academic shock, adjustment, crisis, and resolution. *Excellence in Higher Education*. [Online] 3(1): 14–36.
- Norton L, Floyd S and Norton B (2019) Lecturers’ views of assessment design, marking and feedback in higher education: A case for professionalisation? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. [Online] 44(2): 1–13.
- Ploner J (2018) International students’ transitions to UK higher education – revisiting the concept and practice of academic hospitality. *Journal of Research in International Education*. [Online] 17(2): 164–178.
- Thompson L, Bagby J, Sulak T, et al. (2017) The cultural elements of academic honesty. *Journal of International Students*. [Online] 7(1): 136–153.
- Tu H (2018) English Versus Native Language on Social Media: International Students’ Cultural Adaptation in the U. S. *Journal of International Students*. [Online] 8(4): 1709–1721.
- Wu W and Hammond M (2011) Challenges of university adjustment in the UK: A study of east Asian master’s degree students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. [Online] 35(3): 423–438.