Academic Adjustment in the UK University: A Case of Chinese Students' Direct-Entry as International Students

Li Li[1] & Jingya Zhang[2]

[1] Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangdong, China

[2] The University of Melbourne, Australia

Correspondence: Li Li, School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

Abstract

This case study examines the academic adjustment of five direct-entry Chinese students at a UK university. Specifically, it investigates two questions: 1) What kind of academic challenges are faced by Chinese direct entrants enrolled in a banking and finance programme at a UK university? and 2) What are the external resources and personal coping strategies that participants perceive to be effective in counteracting these challenges? The findings from in-depth, semi-structured interviews fall under two broad domains: 1) the academic challenges; and 2) the coping strategies. The academic obstacles as experienced by participants include English language issues, content knowledge of the subject, course delivery pace, and time management. The perceived effective strategies that help to overcome the challenges include: making use of pre-sessional programmes, taking advantage of tutorials and professors' weekly office hours, taking an active part in learning and figuring out the best learning approach, and seeking help proactively. This research has implications for educators and students who are involved or interested in similar programmes.

Keywords: academic adjustment, coping strategy, direct entry, international students, UK university

1. Introduction

Studying abroad can benefit students in a variety of ways, including access to new educational environments and resources, improvement of language and study skills, and personal growth and development (Allen, 2013; Duff, 2007; Kang, 2014; Yang & Kim, 2011). Meanwhile, studying abroad also poses a number of challenges, such as language barriers, immersion in a new educational system, loneliness, and social withdrawal (Ying & Liese, 1994; Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Morita, 2009; Lashari et al., 2022). As such, helping students overcome these difficulties to better improve their academic performance and to enhance their study-abroad experience is an issue worth researching.

The topic of international student experience has received growing attention among researchers in the past two decades (Furnham, 2004; Pedersen, 1991). Thus far, research on Chinese international students has mainly been carried out in the United States of America (hereafter USA) (Preston & Wang, 2017). The UK is a popular destination among Chinese students and currently ranks second among Chinese students' choice of study-abroad locations (Ministry of Education, 2019). The number of Chinese students going to the UK to pursue higher education has doubled in the last decade (Weale, 2019). According to the latest figures released by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), Chinese students' applications to UK universities have grown by nearly 30 percent in the last year alone, with 19,760 applications in 2019 compared to 15,420 in 2018, the first time that the number of Chinese applications has overtaken Northern Irish applications (Weale, 2019). Thus, we see the need to conduct research in the UK context.

Among the Chinese students studying in the UK, there is one specific cohort: direct-entry undergraduates. Direct-entry Chinese students at UK universities are mainly enrolled through articulation agreements (Tang & Nollent, 2007, cited in Quan, Smailes, & Fraser, 2013, p. 415). Such agreements, which are signed jointly by a UK and a Chinese university, mandate that the credits obtained by students in the Chinese university can be transferred to the UK university. The Sino-British degree transfer programme is often abbreviated as the 2+2 or 3+1 programme in China, meaning that students in the programme will spend two or three years

studying in China, and then, once they meet the basic requirements outlined in the agreement, they will join the second or third year of their degree study at a UK university.

As international direct entrants, compared with other international students, 'they have less time to adapt to the new regime and their needs are often less visible' (Christie, Barron, & D'Annunzio-Green, 2013, p.623). Their learning experiences are unique and should be explored independently. However, current research on this group of students remains under-represented (Quan, Smailes, & Fraser, 2013). Moreover, previous studies are mostly concerned with Chinese international students in general, regardless of discipline. Nonetheless, academic impediments encountered by international students may differ across different disciplines (Lee, 2013). Therefore, this study targets Chinese direct-entry students in the same discipline, that is, banking and finance. This enables us to examine their experience in a more specific way and to develop a better understanding of their academic adjustment challenges and coping strategies.

Specifically, this study examines the following two questions:

1) What kind of academic challenges are faced by Chinese direct entrants enrolled in a banking and finance programme at a UK university?

2) What are the external resources and personal coping strategies that participants perceive to be effective in counteracting these challenges?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Academic Adjustment During Study Abroad

Studying abroad offers a unique experience to students. When pursuing studies in a foreign country, due to the new learning environment and different sociocultural practices and norms, individuals need to make conscious and explicit sociocultural, psychological, and academic adjustments (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Gopalan, Beutell, & Middlemiss, 2019). The issues that international students face in adapting to a foreign learning environment tend to be more academically related (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007). Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) define academic adjustment as: demonstrating a sense of purposefulness, motivation to learn, actions that comply with academic goals, and satisfaction in the academic environment. This requires students to develop the coping skills and learning strategies to achieve academic success (Cheung & Wong, 2014). Academic adjustment often entails a number of challenges and stresses, which are compounded in an international setting (Greer, 2005; Church, 1982). In a qualitative study among Chinese students in an American university, Greer (2005) summarises seven stressors involved in learning adaptation: oral English, speaking in class, asking questions in class, participation in discussion, research-oriented writing, communication with professors, and adaptation to a new learning environment. On a similar note, Church (1982) notes that Chinese students' English competence and difficulty fitting into a new educational system are strong barriers to their adaptation at American universities. Preston and Wang (2017) explore the academic and personal experiences of Chinese students studying in Canada and identify the main obstacles to their adjustment as social isolation, English language issues, assignments, and theoretical expectations of the programme. Furthermore, Geelhoed, Abe and Talbot (2003) find that Asian international students are less adept at learning and social adaptation than non-Asian international students at American universities. Gu (2012) concludes that it is more difficult for Chinese international students to overcome academic impediments than social ones. As such, the main focus of this study is on academic adjustment among Chinese students in the UK.

2.2 Academic Adjustment of Direct-Entry Chinese Students

Currently, very little research has been conducted on the academic adjustment of direct-entry Chinese international students. Wang (2013) uses questionnaires and reports of students' overseas learning experience to document the academic adaptation challenges and difficulties encountered by direct-entry Chinese students in the USA. Before going abroad, participating students were enrolled in different Chinese universities through different degree transfer programmes. Wang (2013) identifies three major stressors and challenges facing direct-entry Chinese students in the USA: English language barrier, immersion in a new learning environment, and culture shock. Quan, Smailes and Fraser (2013) investigate second-year and final-year direct entrants at a UK university. Their findings indicate some similarities exhibited by most international students. Additionally, they observe that final-year direct entrants need more support than second-year entrants, as they must adjust more quickly to the UK learning environment.

2.3 Learning Banking and Finance

University-level banking and finance courses cover a broad range of economic topics, including financial

management, financial decision-making, asset and liability management, econometrics, etc. These courses aim to deepen students' understanding of how financial systems work and equip them with the skills needed to deal with a variety of financial problems. As such, Zhao and Gu (2011) suggest banking and finance education should attach importance to theoretical education and the cultivation of students' ability to put theory into practice, as well as mastery of foreign language, information technology, and other transferrable skills such as effective communication and open-mindedness. As far as student learning of banking and finance is concerned, Zhao and Gu (2011) observe that many students struggle with quantitative analysis and lack the skill to put theory into action. Lu (2016) points out that Chinese students consider the course to be stressful because the theories and concepts concerning banking and finance are abstract and difficult to understand. Such student perceptions are not isolated. Krishnan et al. (1999) report that up to 88 percent of 275 American business undergraduates who had taken a finance course perceived the course to be more challenging than other courses they took, and a majority of students said they would not have taken the course if it were not compulsory. Learning difficulties in such courses are exacerbated for direct-entry Chinese students because they are learning the subject in a foreign language and environment.

3. Method

This case study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research enables us to discover the deeper meaning of individuals' 'lived' experience (Stern, 1994), understand how different people see social reality, and demonstrate how their perceptions shape the actions they take within that reality (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). Qualitative researchers employ in-depth interviewing quite extensively (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). An interview is 'a conversation with a purpose' (Kahn & Cannell, 1957, p. 149) and 'one of the most important tools in social analysis' (Goulding, 2002, p. 23). Furthermore, it is a particularly valuable tool for getting at the deeper attitudes and perceptions of the interviewees (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). In addition, the interviews in this study were semi-structured, enabling participants to talk about issues that might not appear on the questionnaire (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

3.1 Participants

Given that the present study is concerning a specific group, five participants, Alisa, Andrew, Baron, Clark and Sherry (all are pseudonyms) were selected for the following reasons. First, they were direct-entry Chinese students from the same UK university. Before going to the UK, they studied in the Chinese university for two years. Second, they each studied in the UK university for at least one year. As Presbitero (2016) highlights, the whole process of cultural adjustment should be longer than six months. Four students had finished their second year of degree study in a UK university, while Sherry had finished her second and third year of degree study in the same university and was pursuing a graduate degree in economics at the University of Warwick. Finally, they majored in the same discipline: banking and finance.

3.2 Data Collection

Participating students were assured that the interview data would be used solely for research purpose and their spoken answers would be kept confidential. The interview took place during summer vacation when participants returned to China and was conducted by phone or in person. The first author conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with each participant. In the first round, interview questions aimed to elicit participants' reflection on adaptation process, e.g., 'As a direct entry student, what challenges did you experience at the UK university?' and meaning-making, e.g., 'What do you think is the most effective strategy for counteracting challenges at the UK university?' The second round of interview allowed participants to verify the transcripts and examine the themes of the first interview. Questions were improvised to encourage elaboration and verify responses. All interviews were conducted in Chinese in order to facilitate participants' expression through the use of their native language. Each interview lasted for 40 to 90 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded for accuracy and verbatim transcripts were conducted.

3.3 Data Analysis

In order to truly represent participants' perception, the second author stepped in to help with the interview data analysis. We analysed the interview data independently of each other and then discussed the themes. We tried to suspend our own preconceptions of participants' experiences and relied on their narratives to examine the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Content analysis (Hycner, 1985) was used to evaluate and sort the interview data. First, the entire recording was replayed repeatedly and the transcript was read a number of times in order to identify the emergence of specific units of meaning and themes. Later on, we went over the transcripts again, aiming to elicit the participants' units

of general meaning. Then, we benchmarked the units of general meaning against the research questions and eliminated irrelevant units of meaning. Subsequently, we decided whether some of the units shared a common meaning or theme and then put relevant units under the same cluster. The central themes of these clusters were then sorted. In doing so, inference was made from the existing clusters of meaning to determine the inner meanings shared among them. The central themes of these clusters were later compared with the central meanings derived from other interviews. Subsequently, a summary of each individual interview incorporating the themes elicited from the data was written up. The summary and themes were presented to participants for their verification in the second interview. After that, we identified the general and specific themes of all the interviews. Finally, we narrowed the data down to two major themes regarding participants' transition experiences.

4. Findings

Two major themes (academic challenges and coping strategies) and sub-themes within each (such as English language issues, content knowledge of the subject, course delivery pace, time management, pre-sessional programmes, tutorials, positive attitudes and help-seeking behaviour) emerged from the academic experiences of direct entrants in this study. The findings are presented mainly in the form of participants' verbatim comments. This approach is adopted in the light of Maxwell's (1996) suggestion that providing readers with thick rich information allows them to make their own judgements of the soundness of the study.

4.1 Academic Challenges

When asked about the challenges facing international direct entry students at the UK university, participants seemed to frame their discussion on academic issues. The biggest challenge was the language barrier, particularly listening and academic writing competencies. It took them almost one term to become familiar with their professors' accents and understand the content of the lectures. Sherry remarked:

> To be honest, in the first term, I was totally at a loss in the lecture. Some of the professors are from southern European countries and speak with a heavy accent. I don't know what they are talking about.

Sherry's experience was not unique. Alisa, Andrew, and Baron held similar views. Their comments included: 'My professor is from an Asian country. He speaks English with an accent. I can't make sense of what he says' (Alisa); 'I am not familiar with my professor's oral English. He has an accent' (Andrew); and 'I can't understand my professor's English' (Baron). Because of difficulty understanding their professors' accents and confusion with regards to lecture content, participants felt extremely desperate during the first term in the UK.

In addition to these listening impediments, academic writing was another obstacle to participants' learning. Participants pointed out that in their programme, writing mainly relates to coursework and final examination. Two-thousand-word writing assignment, for instance, was not an easy task. Clark said: 'I panic when, all of a sudden, I am supposed to write an essay with thousands of words.' In addition, participants mentioned that they were worried about essay writing in the final examination:

> There are only five essay questions in the final exam and we are supposed to answer three of them. It is dreadful. It requires us to be familiar with the textbook content and also know how to synthesise fragmented pieces of knowledge (Andrew).

> For one exam, there were three essay questions and we were to answer only one question. Maybe my answer missed the point or maybe I was not good at essay writing. I failed the exam (Sherry).

> Some of the participants failed one course during their first term. Although their failure might be attributable to a number of factors, one of the significant barriers to learning as perceived by them, besides listening, was academic writing ability. 'Essay writing, essay writing, essay writing: this is one of the biggest impediments to my studies' (Alisa).

The second challenge to participants' smooth transition to the learning environment in the UK was the subject itself. Finance courses are highly challenging because they feature theories and have a heavy focus on quantitative analysis. If students have difficulty in understanding the theory and the application of mathematical formulae, how can they achieve satisfactory academic performance? The participants commented: 'Econometrics is really challenging and has lots of statistical analysis' (Andrew); 'Macroeconomics is difficult. There are so many things to learn in this course'(Baron); 'Even if the lecture were delivered in Chinese, it would be difficult for me to understand their meaning, let alone in English' (Alisa); and 'In the final examination in the first term, I didn't even fully understand the exam questions because of some of the terminology' (Sherry).

In addition to the subject itself, the fast pace of course delivery was another burden on these international

direct-entrants.

> The whole term lasts about two months. We have an approximately two-hour lecture and one-hour tutorial each week. Professors need to disseminate most of the essential knowledge within that limited time, so the lecture is really fast-paced (Clark).

> Every day I was preoccupied with different courses. In each lecture, [the professor covered] lots of stuff, so many theories, and a great amount of mathematical calculation. You can imagine how stressful I was in the first two terms (Sherry).

> The professor teaches so many things in one lecture. It is really hard for me to digest it (Baron).

The fourth obstacle participants faced was time management. Participants mentioned that the schedule of examinations in the UK is fundamentally different from that in China. In the UK, students sit their exams right after vacation. How to manage time properly to adapt to such exam schedule perplexed some of the participants.

> Vacation means free time to us Chinese students. In the UK, however, during the vacation, you need to finish reports. You are also supposed to prepare for the upcoming unseen exam. During this time, I usually study from 8:00 a.m. in the morning to 3:00 a.m. the next morning, doing a wide range of reading and writing. I know some of my classmates study the whole night for several days before the exam (Alisa).

> Vacation means doing assignments and preparing for the exam. You need to manage your time well. You need to have a study plan. Otherwise, you suffer (Sherry).

> Time management is extremely important in the UK. I did not manage time properly in the first term. Sometimes I felt really idle. Sometimes I was overwhelmed by reports, projects, quizzes, exams, etc. (Andrew).

4.2 Overcoming Academic Challenges

Participants' perceptions of effective strategies for combating these challenges fall into two categories: external resources and personal coping behaviour.

As far as external resources are concerned, pre-sessional programmes, in particular, academic writing sessions, were highly appreciated by the participants. For all participants, pre-sessional programmes varied from six to 10 weeks, depending on their International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score. Participants stated:

> I took the pre-sessional 10-week programme. It mainly consisted of two parts: courses to improve our communicative skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and courses to enhance our academic ability. I especially liked the session on academic writing. The tutor taught us how to write to meet academic integrity requirements. I don't think I have obtained sufficient knowledge regarding these issues in China. I learned a lot and it was very useful for my following studies in the UK (Sherry).

> I spent 10 weeks in the pre-sessional programme. I liked the academic writing courses in the programme particularly. The teacher taught us how to paraphrase, reference, and how to write logically, etc. This has been beneficial to my studies here (Andrew).

Other participants expressed similar appreciation for the academic writing courses in the pre-sessional programme. Further, they acknowledged that other sessions in the programme were good but that they did not benefit from them much. For instance, they still had listening difficulty in understanding the lectures during the first term. Alisa said: 'Other sessions in the pre-sessional programme were OK, but I didn't value them as much because they did not help me much.'

In addition to improving participants' English language skills, two participants mentioned that the pre-sessional programme also offered them the opportunity to make friends:

> I found my best friend when I participated in this programme. Throughout my two years' study here, whenever I had some subject-knowledge problems, I always turned to my best friend and he helped me patiently. I felt really lucky to join the programme (Sherry).

> This was the best time to find a good friend, because the schedule was not tight, and everyone had just arrived in the UK and was feeling relaxed and happy. Once the term officially starts, everyone is busy with lectures and assignments. Other than in the classroom, it is difficult to meet classmates (Andrew).

Secondly, all participants made use of tutorials and professors' weekly office hours to help them with their academic adjustment. They stressed that they preferred these two modes of teaching over lectures during the first term when they were not adapting well to the learning environment in the UK. The participants noted: 'There were approximately 10 to 15 students in the tutorial. It was much easier to ask questions and get help from tutors

who were often doctorate students' (Sherry); 'The tutors in the tutorials are also very knowledgeable. They answer my questions patiently' (Clark); 'I like to bring my questions to the tutorial. The teachers are very patient. You don't need to worry because only about 10 students are in the tutorial. To me, tutorials are a time for questions and clarification' (Baron); and 'Tutorials are genuinely helpful to me in my studies here' (Alisa). Similarly, Andrew appreciated the benefits he obtained from tutorials. In addition, he said his tutors were responsible and approachable:

> I missed a tutorial because I overslept. To my surprise, my tutor gave me a call and told me he had three other tutorials in the week and that I could go to one that fit my schedule. I never thought my tutor would remember me. I was pleasantly surprised by the attention my tutor gave me (Andrew).

The third effective coping behaviour as perceived by participants was taking an active part in learning and figuring out the best learning approach. To be specific, this involved two personal behaviours that participants adopted: first, reviewing professor's video lecture after class; and secondly, preparing for upcoming lectures. For the first approach, participants said: 'I usually downloaded the video lecture from Blackboard (the university's web-based learning system). This was a good way to grasp what the professor said in the lecture' (Sherry); 'You can watch the video lectures many times. It was really helpful, as I did not fully understand what the professor was talking about in the lecture' (Clark); and 'It enabled me to get acquainted with the professor's accent in a quick way' (Baron). In addition, participants altered their other learning methods to adjust to the learning environment in the UK. They commented: 'Now I always prepare for the lecture in advance. In this way, I know what I am going to learn in the upcoming lecture' (Andrew); 'When I prepare for the lecture, I usually note down the questions that puzzle me. If I can't get them resolved in the lecture, I will take the questions to tutorial or the professor's office hours' (Sherry); and 'Every week you should do revision. It is important. It is a bad idea to review just before the final exam. If you do, you can't get satisfactory marks' (Alisa).

Lastly, participants consider proactive help-seeking as beneficial to counteracting academic challenges. Sherry noted: 'I am shy and withdrawn. After studying in the UK, I have learned to be outgoing.' Because of her difficulty understanding the professor's accent and the course content, Sherry learned to modify her own learning methods and, at the same time, seek external help. As described previously, she was fortunate to make a Chinese friend in the pre-sessional programme. Whenever she had questions, she asked him for help. She also developed a good relationship with a local student who helped her with learning difficulties. Sherry highly appreciated the help from this friend:

> She is a good teacher. Sometimes I think her explanation is much more understandable than that of the professor. She is also kind. She likes to help other students. Before the final exam, she will ask our class if we have any questions. If we do, she will answer them very patiently.

Other participants took similar approach to dealing with academic challenges.

> Whenever I encountered learning difficulties, I not only turned to my Chinese friend but also to two international students. We were in the same coursework group once and I was on good terms with them. I liked group work very much. It offered me a good opportunity to communicate with local or international students. We helped each other. It was really fun (Andrew).

> When I had course-related questions, I would first take the question to the study group. Everyone, either Chinese or native student, was eager to offer help. Sometimes the question could be resolved in the group (Alisa).

> My English friend (in the same class) was very kind. He was always ready to help me when I asked him the question (Baron).

When participants were asked what prompted them to be active in help-seeking behaviour, two different insights were offered. Sherry said: 'Because I was in a foreign country. Sometimes my Chinese students could not offer me help. If I did not turn to foreign students, I might fail.' This indicates that being direct-entry might have impacted the behaviour. Andrew offered the answer more from a personality perspective. He stated: 'If you don't have preconceptions about foreign students, you will find most of them are easy to get along with and willing to help others.'

5. Discussion

This research investigates the adaptation experiences of five Chinese students who are international direct entrants majoring in the same discipline at a UK university. Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews, our findings reveal that this group of participants experienced challenges similar to those of other international students and also some that are unique to them.

First, English language proficiency was found to pose a significant challenge to their learning. This is consistent with a number of studies on overseas students (Greer, 2005; Wang, 2013; Quan, Smailes, & Fraser 2013; Gopalan, Beutell, & Middlemiss, 2019). In particular, English listening and writing competencies were highlighted as barriers to academic adjustment. This, in part, explains why pre-sessional programmes aimed at improving students' English language abilities and their sociocultural competence were highly valued by participants. The participants especially appreciated academic writing sessions focusing on paraphrasing, citation, referencing, academic integrity, etc. This kind of knowledge is crucial to students' learning in the UK because adequate writing skill plays an important part in the subsequent coursework and essay questions in unseen exams. As such, sessions on academic writing are a real necessity and a benefit to most Chinese students. Such sessions provide strong support for students' future learning in the UK. To date, pre-sessional programmes have proven beneficial to international students. This is in line with previous research that holds institutional support plays a crucial role in international students' academic adjustment (Smith, 2016; Gopalan, Beutell, & Middlemiss, 2019)

Secondly, Chinese direct-entry students encounter challenges concerning teaching and learning modes. This is consistent with other research on this particular group (Quan, He, & Sloan, 2016; Wang, 2013) and on almost all Chinese students studying abroad (Wang et al., 2012; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2016). It is widely accepted that Chinese students are used to following a structured way of learning, and that they prefer to follow professors' instruction, are not enthusiastic about group work, tend not to play an active role in class discussion, and avoid asking questions out of fear of losing face (Jones, 1999; Zhang, 1999; Woodrow & Sham, 2001). In this study, as can be seen, participants did exhibit some of these Chinese learning style features; however, they also appeared to adjust to new teaching and learning methods and tried to figure out a mixed approach that worked best for their academic success. When faced with learning difficulties, the participants' coping behaviour was positive and proactive. For instance, they studied the professor's video lecture again and again until it was understood, and went to tutorials and used professors' office hours to ask questions. None of the participants said they hesitated to ask questions in tutorials or professors' office hours because of a fear of losing face or power distance. They also adjusted their learning methods by trying to prepare for upcoming lectures and reviewing previous lectures. They engaged in group work, viewing it is a good opportunity to get acquainted with local students or other international students. As can be seen, their learning approaches and coping strategies for overcoming learning obstacles, to a large extent, run counter to some popular views about Chinese international students in the existing literature (Jones, 1999; Zhang, 1999; Woodrow & Sham, 2001).

Thirdly, Grebennikov and Skaines (2008) note that many students do not take the initiative to seek academic help they need or that is offered at universities. For international students, barriers surrounding language, stigma, culture, and acculturation appear to hinder them from help-seeking (Tang, Reilly, & Dickson, 2012). However, in this study, the attitudes and approaches adopted by the participants are very inspirational. They took the initiative to seek academic help from tutors and seminar teachers. They also approached local and other international students without any stereotyped preconceptions. They participated in group activities enthusiastically with the hope of interacting with more students and adapting to university life in the UK. Proactively seeking help from external resources was a common characteristic among participants in the present study. This, to some extent, contradicts previous findings on university students' help-seeking behaviour (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008).

6. Implications for Practice

The findings of international direct entrants studying in the UK universities have important implications for educators and prospective students in similar programmes. First, the transition is not always easy for international students in the UK (Wu & Hammond, 2011), particularly direct entrants (Christie, Barron, & D'Annunzio-Green, 2013), and direct-entry Chinese students are no exception. Current academic assistance and university support are adequate; however, more improvement could be made by identifying these students' unique needs, challenges and introducing a more student-centred approach. Secondly, in order for prospective students in similar programmes to make a smooth transition and be academically successful, they need to improve their English language competencies, be active to make changes in their modes of learning, be open, and proactively seek help. At the time of this study, Sherry had finished her second and third year of degree study in the UK and was pursuing a graduate degree in economics at the University of Warwick. Other four participants expressed their intention to do a graduate degree in the UK. As indicated by participants' experiences, the initial stage of academic adjustment is highly stressful, but the outcome is often positive (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Wang & Byram, 2011).

7. Conclusion

Most research on the adaptation of Chinese international students has been conducted in the USA (Preston & Wang, 2017). However, the findings of such research might not be directly transferrable to another group of students: international direct entrants. As such, this study focuses on international direct-entry students to investigate their transition experiences at a UK university and examine what kind of challenges they encountered and how they coped with these difficulties. The academic obstacles as experienced by participants include English language issues, content knowledge of the subject, course delivery pace, and time management. The perceived effective strategies that help to overcome the challenges include: making use of pre-sessional programmes, taking advantage of tutorials and professors' weekly office hours, taking an active part in learning and figuring out the best learning approach, and proactively seeking help. The small size of the participants restricts the generalization of the findings. Nonetheless, the findings can be unique and valuable to future Chinese international students and educators in similar contexts. More research is necessary to explore the educational experiences of students in other disciplines. With more understanding of students' experiences and perceptions during their studies abroad, more targeted assistance can be designed and offered to meet their needs and, ultimately, improve their learning experience in the foreign country.

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