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Patrick McMahon

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**A GROUNDED THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS  
IN A BRITISH UNIVERSITY: MAKING THE GRADE**

McMahon, Patrick

**Award date:**  
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**A GROUNDED THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE  
STUDENTS IN A BRITISH UNIVERSITY: *MAKING THE GRADE***

**By**

**Patrick McMahon**

A thesis submitted to Plymouth University in partial fulfilment for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

Social Science Doctoral Training Centre

**December 2015**

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank everyone who has helped and supported me in this study. Most of all I would like to thank the international students who agreed to be interviewed by me for this research. Your openness, frankness and honesty have made the research a fascinating process of discovery. I am in awe of your achievements now that I understand the challenges that you have faced every day during your university studies.

I would also like to thank academics and supervisors who have supported and encouraged me, in particular Pedro, Philip and Michaela who have given me excellent guidance and encouragement throughout. Thank you to fellow grounded researchers who I met at conferences and online and whose collective wisdom has given me such guidance and support. Thank you to the library staff who always responded positively and promptly in my search for source materials. Thank you also to ELC colleagues for your kind encouragement. Finally, thank you to my family who have been a constant source of support to me during my study.

## **Author's declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

Work submitted for this research degree at the Plymouth University has not formed part of any other degree either at Plymouth University or at another establishment.

Work on this thesis was presented at the Postgraduate Plymouth Symposium (2012) and the Vice-Chancellor's Teaching and Learning Conference, Plymouth University (2015).

Word count: 69, 119

Signed:

Date:

## **Abstract**

### **A grounded theory of international postgraduate students in a British university: *Making the grade***

The aim of this study was to produce a grounded theory to describe the experiences of international students living in the UK and studying in a British university, and to understand and explain their behavioural responses to those experiences. Eighteen postgraduate international students were interviewed at a university in the south-west of England and the data was analysed using classic grounded theory methodology. The theory proposes that international students' two biggest concerns are in regard to their English language skills and their detachment from home students. Students felt that their language skills were inadequate and they perceived themselves to be disadvantaged because of having to operate in a second language. They felt ignored when they attempted to reach out to home students and as a result they turned to co-nationals and recreated their home environment. International students were surprised at the size of the challenge they faced when they took up their studies and had to work hard to bridge the gap that existed between their academic and sociocultural skills and those needed in the UK. International students provided emotional, practical and academic support to each other but the academic support they offered to each other was not always good quality. International students engaged in a process of identity change during their stay in the UK which reflected the multiple and changing nature of their identities and during which they gained the skills they needed to be academically successful.



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## **Key terms, abbreviations and acronyms**

Key terms, abbreviations and acronyms are dealt with as they appear in the text, however this section presents a useful section the reader can refer to as required.

**Co-nationals:** individuals who share the same nationality

**CHCB: Confucian heritage culture background:** having a background in a culture heavily influenced by Confucianism, commonly attributed to people from China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea, Japan and Singapore.

**CoP:** Community of practice

**EFL:** English as a Foreign Language

**ESL:** English as a Second Language

**HE:** Higher Education

**HEA:** Higher Education Academy

**HEFCE:** Higher Education Funding Council for England

**HEI:** Higher Education Institute

**HEP:** Higher Education Provider

**Home students:** university students originating from within the UK

**Host society:** the society which newcomers move into, in this case UK society

**International students:** university students originating from outside the EU and North America who have come to the UK for the purpose of university study

**L1:** first language, or mother tongue

**L2:** second language

**NNS:** non-native speaker

**NS:** native speaker

**SLA:** second language acquisition

**Sojourner:** temporary resident from a different country

**TL: Target language:** the language which second language learners want to learn

**UKCISA:** United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs

**UKCOSA:** The Council for International Education (became UKCISA in 2007)

# Chapter One: Introduction

---

## 1.1 Background to the study

This research project is a result of my involvement with, and interest in, international students studying at university in the United Kingdom. This interest reflects my current occupation as a lecturer in English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) in a British university and also my growing awareness of the importance that factors outside the classroom play in student learning. Such factors seem to play a much greater role for my students here in the UK than they did for my students when I worked as an English teacher abroad.

Working abroad I was always the foreigner, the outsider, often struggling to make myself understood and to understand the society around me. But my students were in their home environment and, although they may have struggled with English inside the classroom, they walked out of the classroom back into their own culture where they knew how to behave and could communicate effortlessly with those around them. I was a foreigner, but my occupation gave me professional satisfaction and standing and I was usually treated with respect inside and often outside the classroom.

Returning to the UK and working as a lecturer in a British university, I started to be conscious of the gulf between international students and home students, how little time they spent together, and how international students, sometimes so confident and outgoing in my non-native English speakers only language classes, seemed to lack confidence outside my classroom and struggled to interact with home students on an equal footing. Colleagues and I also noticed that although international students professed the desire to practise English with



native English speakers, they often failed to take advantage of opportunities that were available for them to do so and instead they spent time with co-nationals or students with similar backgrounds to their own. These contradictions encouraged me to explore what was happening with international students as they followed their studies and it is this desire to understand the international student experience and international student behaviour that was the catalyst for this research.

## **1.2 The internationalisation of UK universities**

Although there is a long tradition of international education stretching back thousands of years (Ward *et al.*, 2001), it is only in very recent years that students have travelled in their hundreds of thousands to take advantage of education systems outside their own countries. In the UK international students were not formally recognised as a group with particular needs until 1968 when the UK Council for Overseas Student Affairs was established (UKCISA, 2008). This was two years after the British Labour government had announced a fee differential for overseas and home students (*ibid*), an event which might be considered as the start of UK HEIs' financial interest in international students. Throughout the following decades there was a steady increase in the number of students from abroad accessing university education in the UK, as Figure 1 shows.

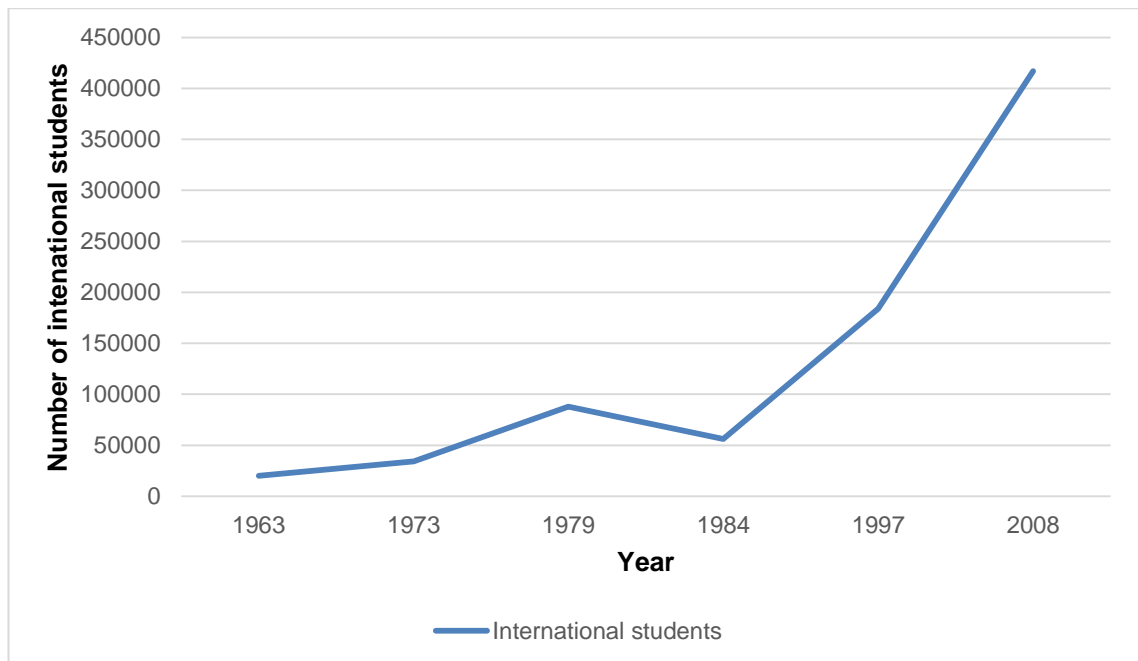


Figure 1: Number of international students in UK universities 1960's – present day (UKCISA, 2008)

At the end of the 1970s the Thatcher government announced the end of the fee subsidy for overseas students. This resulted in a reduction in the number of overseas students in the early 1980s. Consequently there was a drive for the recruitment of international students through British Council run recruitment fairs which marked the beginning of the truly competitive era in international student recruitment (UKCISA, 2008). International student numbers in UK universities increased markedly throughout the following decades. In 2012 the UK accounted for 13% of all tertiary students studying outside their country of domicile, second only to the USA (16%) and trailed by Germany, France, Australia and Canada, each with 6% (OECD, 2014). This meant that in 2013-14, 310,195 non-EU students were enrolled on courses with UK HE providers, a

rise of 3% on the previous year, and non-EU domiciled students accounted for 46% of full time postgraduate places (HESA, 2014a).

This growth in this number of international students in UK universities reflects the huge expansion in the number of students continuing into tertiary education in emerging economies around the world and their willingness and ability to take up UK university places. In 2013 over 23 million students in OECD and G20 countries started university courses, with the average university entrance rate increasing in OECD countries from 39 – 60% between 1995 and 2012 (OECD, 2013). The economic development that populations in emerging economies have experienced was allowing growing numbers of middle-class families to invest heavily in education for their children, with the average Chinese and Indian family spending 13% and 11% of their household income on education (Credit Suisse, 2012) against 2% in the UK (ONS, 2010) with reports of some urban Chinese families spending up to 30% (Starr, 2012). In the case of China it has been claimed (ibid) that the move from a command economy in which jobs were allocated to people leaving education to a market economy in which jobs are won by those with the appropriate skills and qualifications has put huge pressure to be educationally successful. Consequently it seems that obtaining a degree from a western university is high on many people's agenda.

The fact that a degree from one country is considered useful in another is testament to the ongoing process of globalisation, a process characterised by the movement of people and capital across international frontiers in a world which 'has its own distinctive educational formations, with knowledge being recognised as a key site of power' (Hall, 2008, p. 773). The number of students studying outside their home countries has risen constantly and rapidly over the

previous two decades with the total doubling between 2000 and 2011 (OECD, 2013). As emerging economies compete with western companies to produce high-technology products that require a skilled workforce, governments around the world are developing HE systems to produce such workforces and encouraging individuals to gain those skills abroad (WENR, 2011). This meant that in 2012 four million students left their country of citizenship to study, an increase of 100% in less than a decade, with China having the largest number of students studying abroad at 694,400 (UNESCO, 2014) as well as having more students in tertiary education than the USA (Brown *et al.*, 2008). Approximately 4% of new university students will be starting their courses abroad with the majority of these students being from China, India and Korea (OECD, 2013).

UK universities have now reached a stage at which income from tuition fees paid by non EU students plays an increasingly important role in their finances. In the academic year 2012-13 income to universities in England amounted to a total of £2,997M, or 12.3% of universities total income (HEFCE, 2014). This figure is expected to rise to £4,176M by 2016-17 but HEFCE have warned that if there is a slowdown in international student numbers, which is suggested in their 2014 figures, there would be a “significant adverse impact on the sector’s income and surplus projections” (ibid, p15). These comments show how quickly universities have come to rely on income from high fee-paying international students and the potential danger in doing so.

Tuition fees are not the only income that international students bring to the UK. It is estimated that in 2011-12 the on and off-campus expenditure of international students amounted to £7 billion and generated the equivalent of

137,000 full time jobs (Universities UK, 2014). Stakeholders with interests in supporting the continued arrival of fee paying students put it this way:

*International students bring many benefits to the UK, which have been well articulated in recent years: they bring diversity to campus life and enhance the student experience for 'home' students; they support the provision of certain subjects, particularly at postgraduate level; and they provide a valuable source of income to universities and to local economies via expenditure on and off campus. (Universities UK, 2014, p. 3)*

Although it might be argued that universities have started to rely too quickly on international student income, it is also true that they have been encouraged to do so. The first Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI) was set up in 1999 with the aim of raising the number of overseas students choosing to come to study in the UK and this was followed by the second initiative (PMI2) launched in April 2006 which aimed to 'secure the UK's position as a leader in international education' (British Council, 2011). The initiative had the specified aims of bringing another 70,000 international students into UK HEIs and aimed to support HEIs in achieving this figure by providing support in marketing, the student experience, employability, and in building international partnerships. The British Council and its brand name Education UK, together with Universities UK, have collectively formed a formidable marketing group to support individual British universities in their recruitment campaigns to entice students into higher education in the UK.

Alongside government funded efforts to encourage overseas students to choose British universities for their degree, privately run companies have been keen to enter the market place. These range from agents who profit from commission for introducing students to HEIs, to privately owned colleges who offer courses to prepare students for university. Such colleges are increasingly working closely with universities in formal partnerships to deliver 'pathway programmes' resulting in large cohorts of international students progressing into

year 1, year 2 or year 3 of a degree course. INTO, Navitas, Kaplan International Colleges, Study Group UK, Cambridge Education Group and others who provide such courses had 12,586 students enrolled on programmes in the 2009-2010 academic year (Parliament UK, 2011).

It is now considered good academic practice to provide support for international students and the lecturers working with them to ensure a good experience and their academic success and an increasing amount of resources within universities and stakeholders is being spent in this manner. An example of the importance now given to the international student experience is the Teaching International Students Project, a joint initiative between the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) with funding from the Prime Minister's Initiative 2 (PMI2). This two year project, hosted and co-funded by the HEA, focused on the ways that lecturers and other teaching staff can maintain and improve the quality of teaching and learning for international students. This was done through providing guidance and information about how to meet the diverse learning needs of international students and offered workshops, conferences and online materials. The project, and the growth of international student support and advice centres in British HEIs, shows the recognition that international students have gained in the UK and also serves to justify further investigation into their experiences in the form of this study.

An introduction to a study of international students would not be complete without a proper consideration of who falls under the 'international student' label. There is a need to be wary of labels because international students are 'no more a homogenous group than any other group of people' (Trahar, 2007,

p. 6). However, this label is useful in indicating students who are likely to have a very different background to the majority of students, staff and lecturers in UK HEIs. In official statistics a distinction is often made between EU students and non-EU students, because of the difference in fee status of these two groups. EU students (which include UK students) pay the home tuition fee rate with no up-front payment and non-EU students are liable for the full tuition fee payment at the overseas rate. In this study the label 'home students' refers to students who are permanently domiciled in the UK. Although this does not necessarily mean they are culturally homogenous and have English as their first language, we can expect the vast majority to be operating in their home culture and in their mother tongue. The 'international student' label commonly refers to students who are usually domiciled outside the EU and who travel to the UK for the purpose of study. HESA statistics (HESA, 2014b) displayed in Table 1 provide the following breakdown of the top non-EU sending countries to UK HEIs for 2013:

<b>Country</b>	<b>2013-14</b>
China (PRC)	87,895
India	19,750
Nigeria	18,020
Malaysia	16,635
United States of America	16,485
Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region)	14,725
Saudi Arabia	9,060
Singapore	6,790
Pakistan	6,665
Canada	6,350

Table 1: Top non-EU sending countries to UK HEIs 2013 (HESA, 2014b)

Forty three percent of all international students come from China and this explains the inclusion of Chinese students in the literature in this field. If we use the wider 'Confucian heritage culture background' (CHCB) label to describe students from Asian countries with similar cultural traditions, although this is not without controversy (Wang, 2013), then well over half of all international students in UK HEIs would fall into this category. It is not clear how closely



North American students would identify with the 'international student' label given the potential of a similar western background to the UK, and it was notable that no North American students volunteered to take part in this study (see appendix G for a list of the interviewees who did take part in this research). In order to focus on students who have English as a second language (ESL students) and who are likely to experience marked social and educational differences when they travel to the UK for study purposes, I use the term 'international students' in this study to refer to university students who come from outside the EU and North America.

### **1.3 Aims, objectives and rationale**

As numbers of international students increase and the global market in education becomes ever more competitive, there is a growing realisation that in this marketplace the institutions that will win the competition will be those that take an interest in the care and success of their students.

The setting up of educational pathways to bring international students into our universities means that such students appear in faculties and programmes not in ones or twos, but in the tens and in the hundreds, instantly creating whole new communities of students within the larger university community itself. If these large groups of students integrated seamlessly into British academic life and performed as British students perform, there would be no need for this study. However, this has not proved to be the case. Although there has been limited research directly comparing international students' results with those of home students, recent studies such as those by Crawford and Wang (2015) and Ianelli and Huang (2014) have highlighted the attainment gap between Chinese students and home students, and there is a large body of research (reviewed in

the next chapter) that relates to the difficulties that students from outside the UK experience during their university studies.

The need to support international students as effectively as possible during their study in the UK is the justification for this research project. I believe that we cannot support international students effectively until we understand what their main areas of concern are. An analysis of in-depth interview data will reveal the main areas of concern in the lives of international students and will uncover the strategies that they employ to process and resolve those concerns. Whilst the literature review will show that research on the experiences of international students has been done, there has been less research into the strategies that these students employ to come to terms with the issues and concerns they have, and this study seeks to fill that gap. There have been attempts to discover general levels of international student satisfaction using instruments such as the National Student Survey, the Student Perception Questionnaire and the International Student Barometer, but they do not try to understand in any real depth why students feel particular levels of satisfaction. This study is interested in rich 'thick' interview data which offers a researcher the opportunity to view the world anew from a research subject's viewpoint.

The aims of this research project were:

1. To identify the main areas of concern for international students
2. To discover and understand what study and survival strategies international students employ
3. To make recommendations in regard to the support of international students in light of my findings.

I set out to achieve these aims through my objectives which were:

1. To interview international students about their main concerns
2. To interview international students about how they attempt to come to terms with those concerns
3. To analyse the data using grounded theory methodology
4. To generate a grounded theory to explain the data.

Having explained my involvement with international students, considered the rise in student numbers and set out my aims and objectives, the next chapter turns to an initial review of relevant literature.

# Chapter Two: Initial literature review

---

## 2.1 Introduction

This review begins with a consideration of international students' experiences of studying and living abroad. This is a well-visited topic area and which lays the foundation for the whole research project. This is followed by a review of literature in regard to communities of practice (CoPs), how language and culture affect access to those communities of practice and the practices that international students use to resolve the issues they face. The role that CoPs play in language learning is also reviewed, as are the concepts of social capital and symbolic capital theory in order to help me recognize such concepts if they emerge from the data as it is being analysed. There is a very brief review of some strategies employed by international students to manage the concerns they face which concludes the literature review.

The brevity of this literature review reflects the nature of grounded theory methodology. Chapter three presents a full discussion of the role of literature in a grounded theory study, the possible dangers of an early literature review, and explains why I considered an initial survey of the literature in the field appropriate.

## 2.2 The experiences of international students

The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA, previously called UKCOSA until 2007) published reports in 2004 and 2006 detailing a high level of international student satisfaction with studying in the UK, especially in terms of their learning experience. In both these years 87% and 88% of students

respectively rated themselves as satisfied or very satisfied with their courses in general and overall 82% students were satisfied or very satisfied with their overall stay (UKCOSA, 2006). There are however a number of recommendations included in these reports covering issues such as: orientation; health; opportunities to meet UK students and locals; study skills support; accommodation; and costs, all of which hint at issues that are concerning to international students. UKCISA's review of unpublished research on the experiences of international students in UK Higher Education (Leonard *et al.*, 2003) reveals a number of small studies carried out by academics and international students themselves, often in the form of conference papers, and postgraduate research degrees. These studies often focus on specific student cohorts and raise a number of facets of the student experience which reflect those issues mentioned above in the 2004 and 2006 reports. Much of this research picks up on the practical challenges of travel and accommodation; emotional and affective issues including homesickness, isolation, stress and pastoral care; cultural adaptation and integration; language challenges; and the pedagogical differences in learning styles and teacher expectations (*ibid*).

Ryan (2005) claims that international students are likely to be overwhelmed with physical, cultural, social and academic differences when they come to the UK. She believes that many of these students are high achievers at home and expects all international students to experience some loss of self-esteem and self-concept. Ryan discusses three types of shock that students are likely to experience: culture shock, language shock and academic shock. Academic shock is defined as the confusion that new students may experience as they are exposed to different approaches to teaching and learning in the UK and the adaptations they need to make in their study habits to meet the expectations of

UK teachers. Furnham (1997) discusses the high incidence of homesickness and culture shock even amongst students from nearby European countries.

In terms of culture shock, international students have often been the subject of research by psychologists who are interested in how newcomers adapt to new cultures. The phrase 'culture shock', defined as the anxiety resulting from the loss of the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse (Oberg, 1960) has often been used in regard to international students, (see above) and by other researchers (Ward *et al.*, 2001; Burnapp, 2006; Brown, 2009). Culture shock is traditionally presented in the form of a U shaped curve (Lysgaard, 1955) during which after an initial honeymoon period, a period of stress and difficulty is endured followed by a later period of adjustment and calm. Subsequent researchers have offered further refinements to this basic model including a five stage model of contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy and independence (Adler, 1975).

Despite popular usage of the term 'culture shock' researchers over time have eschewed the phrase in favour of investigating 'adaptation' or 'adjustment'.

Ward and Kennedy (1993) argue that using the 'culture shock' label has actually hampered explorations of cross-cultural transition because it is used indiscriminately as a description and an explanation of newcomers' distress.

The term 'sojourner' is also widely used in this literature to describe a temporary resident from a different country and is commonly applied to international students who will only stay in the visited country for the duration of their studies.

Much of the work carried out by psychologists researching cross-cultural adjustment has painted a bleak picture for such students whose experiences of isolation and homesickness have been well-documented (Lu, 1990; Zheng and

Berry, 1991; Sandhu and Asrabadi, 1994) with Chinese students appearing to face the biggest hurdles of alienation and social disconnectedness. Ward (2001) found that international students often reported loneliness and created friendships with compatriots to combat this, and that students who were the sole national representative within a cohort were more likely to suffer long term loneliness. Searle and Ward (1990) established two separate measures of cross-cultural adjustment: psychological wellbeing, which relates to stress and coping, and sociocultural which relates to learning the social skills to fit in to a new culture. In studies on sojourning students to Singapore and New Zealand, Ward and Kennedy (1993) found that psychological adjustment generally depended on an individual's personality factors and sociocultural adjustment depended on the amount of time spent in a new culture, the level of similarity and dissimilarity between the home and the host culture, relations with the host society, and acculturation strategies. Despite this conceptual framework, sojourners' improved cross-cultural skills continue to be hypothesized rather than empirically proven (Ward, 2001).

The lack of meaningful contact with home students and the host community is a recurring theme in the literature in regard to overseas students. Hyland *et al.* (2008) found that despite students (both home and international) appreciating having peers from all around the world, all students noted that there was not actually much mixing of groups. Themes emerging to describe this included: cultural cliques, language, cultural differences in socialising, institutional and degree course barriers, and the amount of effort required to bridge the gap. Brown's ethnographic study into overseas postgraduate students (Brown, 2009) shows that there is a general tendency amongst international students on campuses *not* to maximise the cultural learning opportunities that exist in

universities. Although Brown's review shows that the potential for cross cultural learning is present in such environments, her research of mostly South-East Asian postgraduate students on a British university campus show that although there was great initial enthusiasm for cross-cultural friendships at the start of their course, as time wore on, the tendency was for monocultural relationships and co-national relationships to dominate. The Asian students that Brown interviewed were all aware of the division between European and Asian students when they socialised, ate and when involved in closer friendships. Most tellingly despite students' constant comments that it is good to mix with a variety of students for good reasons - language improvement, cultural competence - all of her interviewees failed to do so and all reported disappointment in the lack of contact with local people and British students. In many cases there was apprehension of racism and resentment that their presence was not welcomed despite their understanding that they had contributed financially to the university and the local economy.

Brown (2009) argues that although academics are quick to espouse the benefits of multicultural campuses, these benefits remain potentialities rather than realities. In reality international students are disappointed with their lack of bonding with home students. Most researchers have noted a 'ghetto pattern' of interaction patterns and 'the willingness to leave the confines of the monoethnic group is a rare phenomenon' (Brown, 2009, p. 185). Brown's review shows that although these monoethnic groupings of international students play important roles in supporting students, they also lead to less intercultural interaction and less language improvement.



Spencey-Oatey and Xiong (2008) found that there was a strong negative correlation between psychological stress and academic success in Chinese students at a British university. They found that whilst students enjoyed the physical environment of their accommodation (in contrast to more basic conditions in China) they faced challenges in the social aspect of their accommodation, mentioning noise and poor behaviour from other students. Some students reported difficulties in holding interesting conversations with British people and therefore preferred to live with compatriots, well aware that this reduced their opportunity to speak English but they appreciated the psychological advantage of living with compatriots. The authors found that most of the Chinese students they interviewed had little opportunity to meet and mix with British people. They were reluctant to make the effort to interact because of their lack of confidence in English and also because of the difference in 'lifestyle and values': 'the interaction is relatively superficial, not deep' (Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2008, p. 49). Some students said they found it more satisfying to interact with other international students because there was less pressure on them to perform so well in English. They all had close friendships with other compatriots – these networks were important for emotional support, and for providing practical help. However, the students in the study understood the disadvantages of being a part of a big national group and said they would like a university with a small number of Chinese students.

Bochner *et al.* (1977) found that overseas students' primary network was mono-cultural and consisted of bonds with compatriots. Their research on Asian students in Hawaii also found that these students did have networks with home students but that these were instrumental in nature in order to facilitate academic and professional ambitions.

Gu and Maley (2008) identified two important facets emerging from students' experiences in their study of Chinese students in the UK: learning shock and existential/life struggles. The first of these they define as unpleasant and difficult experiences learners face in a new learning environment because of insufficient language ability, new teaching and learning styles and different academic expectations. The second, existential/life struggles, encompass the challenges they face in adapting socially to the local society and its values, attitudes and food. They note that student friendship patterns are a strategy to survive and rebuild the home environment. One quote in their paper suggests that some students do not make any attempt to come to terms with their host community and culture:

*'Now it may be that the Chinese students are trying to do that [bridge the cultural divide] but I think that if we are honest, we have to say we don't feel that they are trying to adjust. What they are more likely to do is to keep together as a group and to plug in as soon as they can to the local Chinese community...they are living in China psychologically, socially and culturally, and they just come out of that world in the university for a few hours every day....Then they go out of the classroom and they are back in China'* (Gu and Maley, 2008, p. 233)

Gu and Maley also discuss the 'holistic perspective' of the sojourner experience, that the student in a new country is put to the test as a whole person and the demands put upon the students' whole personality to change. They also noticed that the personality of the student is an important factor in their experience in the UK. They quote many comments from teachers who talk about students who don't come to class, are immature and have poor time management skills. One teacher in their study commented that it takes six months for many students to grasp what the teachers are getting them to do:

*'for postgraduates...it takes at least 6 months for them to really understand what we are doing and why we are doing it and how we are doing it. Some students never fully understand it.'* (Gu and Maley, 2008, p. 234).

The same study found that over time the majority of Chinese learners reported positive adaptation and development in their studies and categorised the improvements in the three areas of improved linguistic competence, increased self-confidence and more involvement in class interaction and a stronger sense of independence in learning. Of all the good things the students experienced they were most satisfied with their improvement in their English language. Also students felt more relaxed in class after a while and felt that they were more independent in their learning. Lecturers noticed important changes in Chinese students' approaches to learning over time, and Chinese students reported that they had to make deliberate and conscious efforts to overcome the danger of losing face in front of their peers. The last point Gu and Maley make is that of the 'reborn' experience by which they mean the opportunity that is offered for personal growth during study experiences and intercultural encounters. Gu and Maley concluded that there is a desire among Chinese students to adapt and develop and they believe that it is the interaction of these learners with their particular living and studying environments that facilitates change.

Research suggests that the academic experience can also be a particularly challenging part of the international student sojourn. Much of this challenge appears to be linked to English language proficiency and it is common for students to feel that whereas they had previously thought their English language skills to be adequate for study, on arrival in the UK, they are surprised to find that their academic language skills do not match their lecturers' expectations. Welikala (2008) quotes several students who felt disempowered because of the differences they met in English language usage when they took up their studies in UK HEIs. It is quite usual for students' confidence in their English often to swing from over-confidence to under-confidence (Carroll, 2008)

and there often appears to be a shock in regard to their language needs: 'their confidence is shattered when they find their earlier training in English...do not help them to resolve practice issues that arise in a classroom environment' (Ramachandran, 2011, p. 203). Nagata (1999) relates experiences from a number of different overseas students and notes the difficulties in essay writing and tutorial participation that they identified. One comment was that 'if you don't have command of the language, you don't have a personality' (Farquhar, 1996 in Nagata, 1999 p18). This brief comment suggests that English language competence plays an important role not in international students' fundamental social and psychological wellbeing.

Montgomery's recent study (Montgomery, 2010) of international students at a British university painted a more positive picture of experiences than other studies. The students she studied operated in supportive social networks, which assisted them in positive ways to cope and helped them towards academic success and she directly links to this Lave and Wenger's theory (1991) of communities of practice. She noted that the strong social group that the students formed demonstrated characteristics of CoPs with its 'shared aims, and interests, its sense of history and initiation of new members' (Montgomery, 2010 p.78). She discusses the way her students appear to be reconstructing the social capital that they lost through their move to the UK and how they replace the social resources which they enjoyed in their home environment with a new network of students like themselves. Montgomery challenges the claim that international students lost out by not mixing with home students because they can form their own support and learning networks. The next section focuses on these communities and their importance for international students' learning and adaptation.

### **2.3 Communities of practice, learning and identity**

An observer taking a walk around a university will see students grouped together in the library and in the cafés with their books and laptops open, discussing, arguing, sharing and helping. Outside the formal structure of degree programmes, modules, lecture theatres, tutorials and seminars, students support each other and learn together. Such support networks, common to any large organisation today, have existed for millennia wherever humans have come together in shared endeavours. However, it is only in recent decades that some theorists have come to regard learning as social practice taking place within a community of practice which gives meaning and context to the knowledge and skills being learnt (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This section reviews the growing awareness of the role that social interaction plays in the learning process and looks at Lave and Wenger's work on communities of practice.

During the 1980s a move away from the traditional classroom based approach to understanding learning and knowledge was fuelled by Vygotsky's writing on Sociocultural Theory which emphasised the importance of social interaction in learning. Vygotsky's views on child development (Vygotsky, 1978) were that such development could not be understood by studying an individual child but also needed to include the social world in which the development took place. Indeed, social interaction is seen as fundamental to cognition because 'All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals.' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). This view of learning makes social interaction a necessary precondition of cognitive development and puts social interaction at the forefront of the learning process. In the 1980s when Lave and Wenger

researched how apprentices learnt their skills, they coined the term 'Communities of Practice' to describe the social communities which were home to the knowledge and skills that the learners had to acquire (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

*'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis'* (Wenger et al., 2002 p. 4)

Wenger (1998) claims that we all belong to communities of practice and these change during our lives. They are everywhere: at home and in the communities we live in. Workers create a practice to get their job done no matter what their formal job description is. Learning that is most transformative 'turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998, p. 6). Communities of practice are therefore considered to be an integral part of our daily lives.

Lave and Wenger (1991) studied learning situations and noticed that learning takes place in a community. Within this community there are practitioners and the process of learning is the process of a learner – a newcomer to the community – moving towards becoming a full participant of that community. That is, learning is a 'process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 29). Lave and Wenger called this process 'legitimate peripheral participation' and this term describes the relationship between the members of the community and its activities and identities. The newcomers are legitimate members of the community and move from peripheral to full participants. Lave and Wenger looked at various learning situations around the world and noted that apprenticeships encapsulated their ideas. Studies of midwives in Mexico, tailors in West Africa, naval quartermasters in

the USA, butchers and non-drinking alcoholics all showed this legitimate peripheral participation: over a period of time newcomers to the social community of learning gradually take on more and more responsibilities of the master to slowly become a full participant of the community of practice.

What is also important is how identity and motivation changes and develops within this process of becoming full community members. In these communities there is little real teaching: the most observable thing is the learning. 'The practice of the community creates the potential 'curriculum' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 93). In such communities there are goals for learning because the learners, who are peripheral participants, are able to gain an overview of the practice and can gain an understanding of what needs to be learned. Lave and Wenger noticed that apprentices learnt effectively in relationships with other apprentices and that where knowledge spread between peers it did so very rapidly and effectively. The suggestion is that it is the engagement in the practice that makes the learning effective and that a community of practice is a necessary condition for the existence of knowledge: the community of practice makes the knowledge meaningful and gives it heritage. Participation in the cultural practice is therefore an epistemological principle of learning.

A community of practice has a reproduction cycle which may last a few years to decades – in which newcomers become the fully fledged participants. As learners learn their identity changes and there is an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner. This framework proposes that the development of identity is central to the development of newcomers. Lave and Wenger (1991) consider that learning and identity are merely different and inseparable aspects of the same phenomenon.

Wenger (2006) considers that there are three essential characteristics of a community of practice: domain, community and practice. The domain is the area of shared interest which identifies the community and which members commit to: a 'shared competence'. It is interesting to note that outsiders might not recognise the expertise of the community, such as the CoP of a street gang who survive on the street. The community is the sum of the joint activities that members engage in: the discussions, the helping, and the sharing of information. The CoP is formed when there is joint interaction and joint learning, even if not on a regular basis. The practice refers to the fact that the members of the CoP are practitioners sharing resources, experiences, tools, advice: a shared practice. This shared practice requires some sustained interaction over a substantial period of time and members may be unaware that their lunch meetings with colleagues have become their main way of sharing and improving good practice.

Wenger (1998) describes the structure of a CoP as consisting of three interrelated terms: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire as represented in Figure 2.



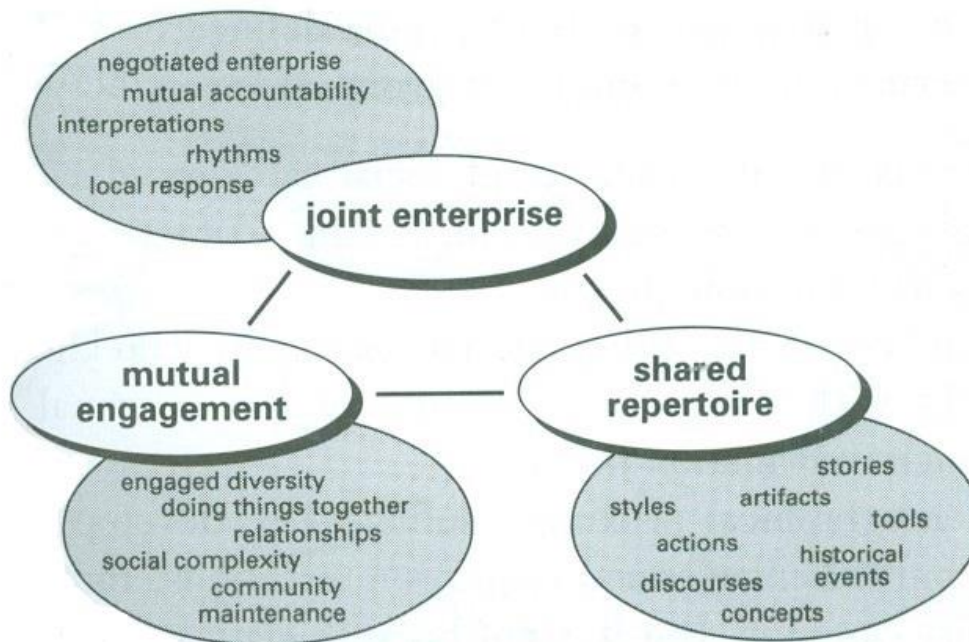


Figure 2 Dimensions of practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 73)

Mutual engagement refers to the fact that through participation community members build relationships known as 'mutual engagement' and it is these relationships which bind the members of the community. The shared understanding of what it is that binds them together is the 'joint enterprise', or the 'domain' of the community. The third part of practice of the community is its shared repertoire: the set of communal resources.

For Wenger learning is central to human identity. More recently his work has focused on learning as social participation (Wenger, 2009): the individual as an active participant in the practices of social communities and in the construction of his/her identity through these communities. In such a context a community of practice is a group of individuals participating in communal activity, continuously creating their shared identity through engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities. Wenger explains how knowing is actually an act of participation: we know the earth goes around the sun, and this knowing is an

'act of participation in complex social learning systems' (p. 226). Wenger argues that scientific knowledge is something that scientific communities have established over long periods of time and knowing is therefore showing competence in social communities. Everyone experiences different communities and everyone's experience of knowing is different so it is the case that knowing involves interplay between social competence and personal experience. Whenever the two are in play and start pulling then learning takes place.

The concept of learning through participating in shared endeavours is also explored by Rogoff (1994), who focuses on communities of learners involved in sociocultural activity. She considers this approach to learning to be in contrast to 'one-sided notions of learning' (p.29) in which learning either occurs through knowledge transmission or knowledge acquisition with learners in a largely passive role. This approach to learning rejects the dichotomy between the transmission model versus the acquisition module of knowledge in favour of a new paradigm of learning within a community: 'learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community.' (p. 209). Rogoff considers learning as a process of transformation of participation itself and proposes that this is a distinct instructional model based on a different philosophy of learning. In a community of learners both mature and immature players are conceived as active: no one has all the responsibility, rather the learners and directors are active in 'structuring shared endeavours'. (Rogoff, 1994, p. 213). Rogoff *et al.* (1993 in Rogoff 1994) found that Mayan families created communities of learning in their homes and that young children learn in this way, but untrained Westerners observing these families failed to appreciate the way that the Mayan children learnt. The Mayan children's activities were

embedded into family wide activities and did not consist of Western one-on-one explicit instruction and Western observers concluded that the children were not being instructed at all. However, observers from other backgrounds (Mayan Japanese, Indian) were able to appreciate the learning that was going on. Rogoff concluded that learners who are not a product of a learning community find it difficult to appreciate and even see the learning taking place in a learning community.

CoP theory and Rogoff's work is important in this research because it highlights the importance of social participation in learning. The early part of the literature review related international students' common feelings of estrangement from home students and their social isolation. Once we begin to appreciate the social nature of learning it becomes a serious matter of concern if learners are not participating fully in the learning communities operating around them. In this vein, McDowell and Montgomery (2006) investigated the role that social networks play in international students' learning experiences in a UK university, and considered them as significant. The researchers believed that the students they observed constituted a community of practice because of their shared ambitions and support they offered each other. They concluded that HEIs should attach more significance to the social context of learning and view learning as a cultural act. UK students should also internationalise their outlook through this process. The reflection process of the research made students think about their identity since they had come to the UK and how they had changed.

## 2.4 Communities of practice and language learning

Wenger's CoP research (Wenger, 2000, 2006 and 2009) offers a useful framework for understanding one of the most important learning processes that international students engage with, that of language learning. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation can explain the success (or indeed the failure) of language learners who move to a new language environment. Within this framework, successful language learners move from the periphery of a community as they gain language skills and are involved in identity change during this process.

Back (2011) researched language learners of Quichua in the USA and Ecuador and found that one of the learners considered that he was marginalised from the community and this prevented him from participating fully in the community and learning the language. Back believes that the co-construction of the subject as an outsider to the community disempowered him from becoming a legitimate participant in the community and hence led to the failure of his ability to learn the language: '...the ... co-constructions of identity and legitimacy could go a long way toward shedding light on the complex process of language acquisition in naturalistic settings.' (Back, 2011, p. 1055). This link between language learning and identity development was explored by Huhtala and Lehti-Eklund (2010) who investigated the development of Swedish writing skills in Finnish university students using first person language learning narratives as data. Their analysis showed students attempting to construct a language identity for themselves, a third place between their native culture and the second language (L2) culture where they could develop a unique L2 identity. The authors suggested that autobiographical texts written by L2 learners give useful clues

about what processes are occurring with the learners. They believe that such language learning narratives (texts about why students are learning their second language and what they hope to gain from learning the language) can be considered as building blocks for their identities as students try to bridge the space between their current and possible selves: creating a language learning narrative is actually the process of creating a new identity which will help students in their learning. They noted that their students' involvement with the community of practice of the language department developed alongside their Swedish skills, reflecting Lave and Wenger's concepts about CoPs.

Other researchers have also linked the importance of community membership to language learning. Murphey *et al.* (2007) concluded that students are more motivated in their language studies if they can see themselves as part of a community – or an imagined community. They believe that students benefit from their language learning narrative and can reflect on their own identity. This builds on previous theories in regard to language learning being an act of creating a new identity. Kramsch (1993) considers that a student learning a foreign language needs to create a 'third place' inside themselves which sits between their first language culture and the second language culture, a process which is a transformative construction of themselves in which they create intercultural meaning and a new identity.

Englander (2009) carried out research into non-native speakers of English in Mexico trying to publish works in English language journals. Although they were mostly recognised authors with published journal articles they found difficulty when they published in English language journals and they were given negative feedback about their English. Englander considers this in the context of

communities of practice: although they were members of their own communities of practice they were trying to move into the community of practice of international scientists publishing in English language journals. Englander put her research into the context of 'the autobiographical self' and commented that the identity of the academics changed as they firstly submitted and then revised their journal articles.

Wenger wrote: 'because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity' (Wenger, 1998, p. 215) and Gao (2011) echoes this concept of identity change: 'learning is a process of becoming or avoiding becoming a certain person, rather than a simple accumulation of knowledge and skills' (p. 288). Gao believes that learners have multiple and dynamic identities and there is a wealth of research focussing on the role that language plays in reconstructing second language learners' identities through communication. Norton-Pierce (1995) writes that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time through their use of language. Shi (2006) considers that people's identities are shaped by and through their language use and these identities are multiple and constantly changing. According to Shi these changing identities structure second language learners' access to target linguistic resources and their opportunities for interaction with target language speakers.

Norton (1997) defines identity as how people understand their relationship to the world, across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future and relates this to desire: for recognition, affiliation, security, and safety. For Norton 'who I am' cannot be separated from 'what I can do'. Norton (2000) claims that power relations play a critical role in social interactions

between language learners and target language speakers. These are important concepts in this study as I consider how international students, who are learners of English and the host culture, access or create communities of practice.

## **2.5 Cultural and social capital theory**

In regard to international students studying at British universities, Montgomery (2010) considers that a lack of language proficiency could make a person's identity difficult both to assert and perceive, and makes the claim that language is a form of social and cultural capital which allows access to understanding and being understood. This assertion makes a consideration of cultural and social capital theory relevant to this review. Bourdieu's definition of social capital is that:

*'Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 119)

Bourdieu's (1991) theory is that language is a form of cultural capital. Cultural capital's symbolic power is not distributed evenly, and linguistic resources possess symbolic power because they can be converted into economic and social capital by virtue of providing better access to education, jobs, social ladders and opportunities. Cultural capital can replace real capital to construct power relations among individuals, institutions and communities. To what extent international students might lose their cultural capital when they move to a foreign university is a matter of interest in this study, and the concept of explaining advantage in society through one's connections makes international students' connections an important area of research.

Shi (2006) considers that language is symbolic capital and that second language users are agents with dynamic and flexible multiple identities. Unequal power relations in diverse socio-linguistic and sociocultural contexts may mediate second language learners' access to linguistic resources and interactional opportunities: these learners may easily find themselves positioned as incompetent students and may be reduced to silence in the majority language market. As learners slowly expand their language resources and social identities, gain cross cultural perspectives and develop multiple lenses to view and comprehend the world, they may rediscover a full intercultural self which lets them participate fully in a new community: they have achieved *legitimate participation* in a new community.

## **2.6 International students' strategies**

This chapter has suggested that international students experience a range of academic, social and psychological challenges in many areas of their lives. This section of the review explores the literature in regard to strategies that students employ in order to respond to the challenges they face. Many of the studies mentioned here relate to Chinese students' strategies and given the composition of the international student body (section 1.4) these are of direct relevance to this study.

The strategy of building social networks with compatriots for emotional support and to recreate the home environment have already been mentioned above (Bochner *et al.*, 1977; Ward, 2001; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2008; Brown, 2009). McClure (2007) found that Chinese graduate students studying overseas employed various coping strategies to manage the variety of tensions they experienced and used the term 'self-determination' to explain how students



adopted a new approach to learning and became more independent in their studies. McClure found that students responded to the academic challenge of studying in the US by developing their independent learning skills and that this involved a 'deepened level of self-awareness concerning the need to change their study practices' (McClure, 2007, p. 212). McClure also found that international students supported each other in their studies, working together in study groups. They also employed memorisation techniques and studied for long hours.

Gao's study (2003) of Chinese students showed that their language learning strategies shifted during their stay in the UK and he claims this is a good reason for taking a sociocultural approach to understanding learner strategies: this approach would understand the learner as a human being and that learner strategies are related to cultural groups. It is argued that learner strategies are not just individual cognitive choices made by students, but that learner strategies are mediated by learning communities. The values and objectives that the learners want to realise will influence their choice of strategy. It is suggested that language learners' motives and goals are crucial factors in deciding their strategy use.

Li (2007) researched the language learning strategies of Chinese research students whilst studying at university in the UK and found that they used a range of metacognitive, cognitive, social/affective and compensation strategies to improve and manage their English language skills. The metacognitive strategies included the conscious prioritisation of and focus on particular language skills, managing and creating language learning opportunities and reflecting on their progress. Cognitive English learning strategies included

exploiting opportunities for naturalistic language practice such as opportunities to take part in spoken interaction, watching television and using the Internet and email. Li also noted the use of questioning for clarification as a strategy, and highlights the importance of this in providing comprehensible input which is considered to be an essential component in second language acquisition (SLA) (Krashen, 1982). This strategy also includes students negotiating over meaning which is also considered central to the SLA process (Long, 1996).

Skyrme (2005) carried out a longitudinal study of Chinese international students in their studies to discover what kind of learning strategies they employed whilst studying degree courses. Skyrme commented on the use of three particular strategies: reading, seeking lecturers' help outside class time and the use of first language (L1) and second language (L2). This research also found a variety of reading strategies employed by students depending on the IELTS level, but at all levels the strategies appeared to show a high level of determination to succeed and an urge to understand text, and not be content with the rote learning. Chinese students were considered to overuse the strategy of appealing to their lecturer for help at Skyrme's university and this was considered as a strategy to overcome their invisibility and assist their transition. However, it was also noted that less vocal and less confident students avoided this strategy and Chinese students reported using this strategy a lot in their home universities. Skyrme's students used their L1 and L2 in their studies depending on their proficiency. This meant that students who felt less secure in their English read textbooks in Chinese first, and then read them in English, and used their L1 for understanding concepts. There was a transition, over time, to more and more use of English. Students were aware of the risks of using their L1: *'it's not a good way because we think in Chinese and*

*sometimes Chinese cannot directly translate to English.*' (Skyrme, 2005, p. 8) but stronger students used exclusively English. Scott, one of the research participants, recounted the conscious decision to use only English when studying and described this as a '*sharp change*' in his study strategy (Skyrme, 2005, p. 9). Skyrme thinks that this decision is carefully made by students who work out and choose a strategy based on their needs at the time, gradually moving more and more into using English in which they are assessed.

## **2.7 Summary**

As in the primary research which will follow later in this study, my interest is in interpretive qualitative research and this was reflected in the review of a relatively small number of studies in depth, rather than a large number of studies which attempt to generalise results to a larger population. The care with which a grounded theory researcher needs to treat literature influenced the extent of the review, however there are a number of points to be made in summary of the review.

The review confirmed that although international students consider UK education to be of a high standard, they experienced a range of difficulties during their stay in the UK which has been described as culture shock, although this general term is not very useful in helping us understand the details of what they go through. The term 'sojourner' has been identified as being useful as have those of 'adaptation', 'adjustment' 'cross-cultural' and 'transition'. Psychologists have distinguished between psychological well-being and sociocultural skills, terms which may well prove to be useful definitions when analysing the data.

The lack of meaningful interaction between home and international students has also been confirmed, although it is not clear quite how international students reflect on this and the effect this has on them, and how international students respond to the challenge of meeting home students remains obscure. It is clear however that international students often spend time with their compatriots and this is despite voicing interests in improving their English and their cultural knowledge and I would like to understand more about this.

It looks like CoP theory would help us understand how international students support each other, but the extent of the support and the nature of it requires further elucidation. Does the mutual support which international students enjoy extend beyond friendship? Does it encompass other types of support, and if so does it make up for support that international students may be missing out on? Does it also adequately explain how international students learn and are they engaged with the identity change that legitimate peripheral participation suggests?

Bourdieu's theories of capital are intriguing in regard to international students. How useful a metaphor is it to consider that international students lose such capital when they come to study abroad? Does the quote "better connected people enjoy higher returns" (Burt, 2000, p. 348) apply to international students at university and can these ideas be used to explain the international student experience, and ultimately to improve it?

These questions have emerged as important points for exploration and the following chapter explains the methodology used to carry out the research.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

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## 3.1 The paradigm of qualitative research

Choosing a research methodology includes more than a consideration of what the researcher wants to discover, it includes a consideration also of how the researcher views the world. Guba and Lincoln (1994) consider that 'questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 105) and define a paradigm as a 'basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator' (ibid). They identify four main paradigms of inquiry: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism. It is not intended to discuss all of these labels in depth here, the intention is to give a brief discussion in order to provide a firm foundation for the current research.

Epistemologically speaking, positivism, in which scientists carry out quantitative research in order to verify or falsify hypotheses, is associated with a range of assumptions including most importantly the reliance on objective, empirical and scientific methods of inquiry and the existence of an objective truth: 'knowledge is construed as something discovered, not produced by human beings (Antonesa *et al.*, 2005, p. 16). The positivist approach to knowledge is that knowledge comes from what can be directly measured and observed. Positivist scientists test hypotheses which are a result of deductive reasoning. This empiricism holds that observation and measurement are reliable and valid ways of finding out the external truth of the world.

As interest in research in human behaviour grew in the last century, so did the belief that quantification was not necessarily the most appropriate approach for such research: 'Human behaviour, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be

understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). This growing interest in qualitative research also grew out of social change and the belief among many that knowledge is not neutral, but is socially constructed and cannot be separated from personal experience (Antonesca *et al.*, 2005). Qualitative research, it was claimed, took a greater interest in explaining complex human relationships and at the same time recognized the values and biases of the researcher (Mark, 1996).

Professionals in the fields of education, health, social work and others have adopted a variety of qualitative methods of research. An early user of qualitative methodology was Anselm Strauss a disciple of the 'Chicago School' of sociologists who, with Barney Glaser, developed the grounded theory approach of qualitative research (Glaser, 1998) which this research adopts. Whereas some writers contrast qualitative research and positivistic research, it is also common to use the label *post-positivism* to describe the era in which researchers have used a range of qualitative methodologies to describe and explain people, behavior, events and relationships (Trochim, 2006). Post-positivism includes a range of ways of looking at knowledge (epistemology), and reality (ontology). Some post-positivists stress the external existence of an objective reality which can be studied scientifically. However, they are different from positivists in that they doubt our ability to know this reality with any certainty. These *critical realists* believe that observers are culturally biased and fallible which means that they cannot hope to uncover the truth in the way that positivists do. Critical realism is referred to as a paradigm in itself by some writers (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) but by others as a form of post-positivism. A critical realist researcher will emphasise the need for triangulation across

methods (using a variety of research methodologies within one study) in order to guard against the many errors in research which can stop the researcher from observing what is happening in reality.

In contrast to critical realists are researchers in the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm whose approach assumes a number of multiple realities perceived differently by people whom all have different perceptions, cultures and beliefs. Our perceptions and observations are fallible (Trochim, 2006) but, more than that, during research, findings are *created* rather than discovered (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This distinction between constructivism and critical reality becomes evident in the different versions of grounded theory discussed later on in this chapter.

Setting my current research in the paradigm of post-positivism implies a number of assumptions about the nature and the aims of the research. A post-positivist researcher needs to understand his or her place in the world and what s/he brings to the research as a human being, shaped as s/he is by background and culture. The post-positivist researcher does not aim to test his or her hypotheses, but is out to *learn* about the world from the viewpoint of his or her research participants and to use that knowledge to affect change:

*'Post-positivist research principles emphasise meaning and the creation of new knowledge, and are able to support committed social movements, that is, movements that aspire to change the world and contribute to social justice.'* (Antonesa *et al.*, 2005, p. 12).

It is hoped that the current research will open up the realities of international students' lives to those who cannot usually hope to gain such insights.

Another useful label to be used for this research is that of *interpretive qualitative research*: 'Interpretive qualitative methods mean entering research participants'

worlds' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 19). Such an approach means that the researcher need not worry about reaching a representative sample in order to present the results as being representative of a larger population. This qualitative research is a 'situated activity that locates the observer in the world... This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

### **3.2 Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is a general research method used by a variety of researchers, qualitative and quantitative, who are interested in discovering basic social processes. It can be defined as 'the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 2) and has data as its starting point.

Grounded theory dates from the 1960s when it was first described by sociologists Glaser and Strauss who had used the method to research people's awareness of dying. In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) the authors explained how they used a rigorous and systematic process of data analysis to uncover a theory which emerged from data they had collected. Glaser's background in quantitative research combined with Strauss's background in qualitative research saw the development of a method which attempted to integrate the richness of qualitative research with the systematic rigour of quantitative research (Walker and Myrick, 2006). Glaser and Strauss's initial work with grounded theory was taking place in the positivist era in which the value of qualitative research was questioned: quantitative researchers saw qualitative research as 'impressionistic, anecdotal, unsystematic and biased'



(Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). Glaser and Strauss's writing up of their grounded theory for the first time offered a systematic way of dealing with qualitative data so that qualitative research could stand alongside quantitative research as rigorous and reliable. However, the key difference in Glaser and Strauss's approach was not in the qualitative/quantitative distinction, but the inductive/deductive one: rather than developing a theory and then seeking to verify it through evidence in the logico-deductive way, they collected data and then systematically developed theory from an analysis of the data in a methodological and rigorous process (Walker and Myrick, 2006, p. 548).

Whilst Glaser's background brought the rigour of quantitative research to the project of grounded theory, Strauss's contribution was an understanding of symbolic interactionism: the theory that assumes society, reality and self are constructed through interaction and thus rely on language and communication. 'This perspective assumes that interaction is inherently dynamic and *interpretive* and addresses how people create, enact and change meanings and actions' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 7). Symbolic interactionism was adopted by Strauss and grounded theory was developed to understand the nature of the world as seen through the prism of the most important assumptions of symbolic interactionism: that humans live in a symbolic world of learned meanings; that they act on the basis of meanings that things have for them; that meanings arise in the process of interaction between people (Aldiabat and Navanec, 2011).

Grounded theory is 'the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method' (Glaser, 1998, p. 3) and is 'suitable for handling many problems that preconceiving methods do not handle' (p. 11) by which Glaser means that grounded theory can help a researcher discover participants'

problems and then generate a theory accounting for the processing of the problem.

For the current investigation this means that through a grounded theory approach, I intended to discover the main concern of the participants and how they attempt to resolve and process that problem. This study is interested in how international students resolve and process the issues they face as international students and I considered grounded theory the most effective approach to uncover the strategies they use to do so. Through the use of grounded theory the main concern of the research participants in the substantive area (being international students) would emerge. This inductive approach relies on the experience of the participants to tell their stories, out of which a theory will emerge which accounts for the patterns of their behaviour. The systematic process in which qualitative data is collected and analysed produces a theory which is grounded in the data, generated by concepts which are found through coding qualitative interview data.

Although grounded theory can be used with a variety of data, it often makes use of in-depth interviews and this study used interviews with international students as its research method. The grounded theory approach provided a rigorous process for me to check and develop theories which emerged from the data. This systematic processing of qualitative data through grounded theory guidelines offers opportunities for uncovering human experiences that other research methods may miss.

Since the 1960s, grounded theory has evolved into a popular methodological approach but its evolution has not been without contention. Researchers coming to grounded theory today will find a number of different permutations of

the approach, often labeled as classical Glaserian grounded theory, Straussian grounded theory (or the Strauss and Corbin model), and constructivist grounded theory. The approach that a researcher favours is likely to depend on their innate belief systems. Before offering a short discussion of the three types of grounded theory it is helpful to consider what the types have in common, that is what the common features of grounded theory can be said to be. Mills *et al.* (2006) identify a set of characteristics common to all grounded theory types: theoretical sensitivity; theoretical sampling; treatment of the literature; constant comparative methods; coding; the meaning of verification; identifying the core category; memoing and diagramming; and the measure of rigour. Charmaz (1995) defines six characteristics of grounded theory: synchronous data collection and analysis; coding and categorizing of themes arising from the data and not from preconceived hypotheses; the development of middle range theories to explain behavior and processes, memo writing; theoretical sampling; delay of the literature review. The details of these features will be explained in later sections. However, firstly, an explanation of the different schools of grounded theory and a justification for using the classic Glaserian approach is provided.

Mills *et al.* (2006) consider grounded theory to be a 'methodological spiral' dating from Glaser and Strauss's original 1967 work. They view the development and divergence of grounded theory methods and the different positions that researchers take towards epistemology and ontology as existing on different points of this spiral. Although Glaser and Strauss originally worked closely together, publications in the 1990s showed how far they had diverged. Strauss and Corbin's landmark *Basics of Qualitative Research* in 1990 earned a response from Glaser entitled *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence*

vs. *Forcing*, a title which highlighted Glaser's criticism about Strauss and Corbin's approach.

In 1967 Glaser and Strauss had outlined an approach to dealing with qualitative data which involved allowing research participants to talk about important things in their lives. Analysis of this data allowed new theory to emerge from the data. This was in contrast to using data to test existing theory which was traditionally the way researchers used data. The process of analysis that Glaser and Strauss described briefly consisted of:

- Initial coding and categorizing of data
- Simultaneous and ongoing data collection and analysis
- Memo writing as a way of note taking which is the first step to theory generation
- Theoretical sampling (choosing who to interview next on the basis of who will give you the most useful data)
- Constant comparative analysis (the constant cross- checking and comparison of one incident to other incidents and data)
- Intermediate coding (further coding in which codes are linked together)
- Identification of a core category (which is intended to eventually explain the grounded theory)
- Advanced coding and theoretical integration
- Generating theory

(Birks and Mills, 2011)

Mills *et al.* (2006) believe that what they call 'classical' grounded theory, espoused by Glaser since the 1960s, asks researchers to enter their research with as few preconceived ideas as possible so they can remain sensitive to the

data. In this way the researcher is considered as a 'blank slate'. Indeed Glaserian grounded theory (Glaser, 1998) demands that there is a need *not* to review the literature of the substantive area being researched for a number of reasons. The most serious of these are that it is likely that the researcher will fall into the grip of received concepts that are inappropriate, do not fit the data and can be sidetracked from the real substantive area. There is also the issue that the researcher will adopt the tone of the research and be in danger of being in awe of the literature and will adopt the voice of others. Lastly Glaser makes the point that until the theory emerges from the data the relevant literature will not be known - when the theory is nearly complete the researcher can turn to the literature and knows which literature to turn to and how to treat it, on an equal footing as a scholar and expert in the substantive area. Mills *et al.* (2006) consider that this approach regards the data as a separate entity from the participant and the researcher, making the approach more of a positivistic one. Strauss and Corbin's view is that engagement with the literature from the start of the research process allows the researcher to use the literature as another voice contributing to the construction of theory. They believe that the researcher constructs theory as an outcome of 'their interpretation of the participants' stories' (Mills *et al.*, 2006, p. 7).

Kendall (1999) notes that the differences between the Glaserian and Strauss/Corbin approaches lie in the latter's use of more complex intermediary coding procedures. Glaser divides the coding process into two procedures: substantive coding (open and selective coding) and theoretical coding (weaving the codes into a theory). These processes are described in detail below when I outline the methodological processes I followed. Strauss and Corbin's coding however, consists of three distinct phases: open, axial and selective. Whereas

both types of grounded theory use open coding to break data into categories, Strauss and Corbin's axial coding relates these categories back to a 'paradigm model' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 96) which is best considered as an organizing scheme connecting categories which has six pre-determined sub-categories. It is this forcing of the data into a particular scheme which Glaser (1978) objects to, insisting that emergent codes should be driven by emergent concepts.

Charmaz (2006) also notes Strauss and Corbin's emphasis on the technical procedures of complex axial coding processes rather than Glaser's comparative methods but also considers both approaches to be positivistic. Charmaz's claim is that both classical and Strauss and Corbin's versions of grounded theory discuss 'discovering' theory that emerges from the data, and that this theory is separate from the researcher. Charmaz however believes in the *construction* of theory: 'I assume that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practices,' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). This approach means that any theory offers an interpretative portrayal of the world, not an exact copy of it; it is not an exact copy of it because we can never hope to know what the reality is.

Glaser's response (Glaser, 2012) to constructivism is a questioning of this mutual construction of theory. This mutual construction is, according to Glaser, an 'unwarranted intrusion of the researcher' (2012, p.1) into the participant's data who has been trying to get the researcher to understand the world from his or her viewpoint. Glaser again claims that the constant comparative method will

generate theory, which comes from analysis of the participants' data. His warning over the years, is to trust in emergence and not to force the data.

This research project adopted the Glaserian approach to grounded theory because I became convinced of the need to trust in emergence and had concerns about using a constraining and intricate coding paradigm. Glaser's need for the research participants to identify the research problem chime with my feelings and I am more interested in knowledge generation than knowledge verification. Most importantly, my focus was on generating a theoretical explanation of a substantive area to identify group patterns of behavior and it remains my belief that this approach was the most appropriate for this study.

### **3.3 Ethical approval and ethical issues**

Before beginning the research it was important to consider ethical issues and to gain ethical approval from my university faculty. The final version of the Ethical Approval Form which was submitted to the faculty and which gained approval is presented in appendix A. After consideration of a number of professional codes of ethics including the Social Research Association (Social Research Association, 2003), the British Sociological Association (British Sociological Association, 2002) and the Market Research Society (Market Research Society, 2014), I decided that those published by the Social Research Association (Social Research Association, 2003) were most appropriate to my research environment and decided to adhere to them. The guidelines provide obligations in regard to: society, funders and employers, colleagues, and subjects and here I consider obligations to the participants of my study to be most important. The main issues to consider were: avoiding undue intrusion, obtaining informed

consent, protecting the interests of participants , maintaining confidentiality and preventing disclosure of identities.

*Avoiding undue intrusion:* The nature and design of my semi-structured interviews meant that undue intrusion into students' privacy was avoided. Grounded theory has the advantage of focusing on issues which participants bring to the table and which they want to explore. Potential questions were prepared before the interviews but the only certain question was the opening question which was the same in each case. (See appendix B for the interview schedule I prepared before my first interviews and before I started to pursue particular themes.)

*Obtaining informed consent:* Participants were invited to participate in interviews by group email. No students were contacted individually and no student names were used in email invitation to avoid students feeling any pressure to be involved in the research. At the interview, students were informed orally about the nature of the project and they were asked to confirm again that they were freely volunteering to take part in the research. I also explained that they could stop the interview at any time, and that if they wanted to withdraw their participation after the interview they could contact me and their interview data would be deleted. I asked students to sign a consent form before the interview (appendix C). The email invitation is presented in appendix D.

*Protecting the interests of subjects:* 'The social researcher should try to minimise disturbance both to subjects themselves and to the subject's relationships with their environment' (Social Research Association, 2003, p. 35). My concern was that participants might become upset relating difficulties they had experienced and I impressed this possibility upon participants during brief



comments at the start of the interview and reminded them of their ability to stop the interview at any time.

*Maintaining confidentiality:* I guaranteed anonymity to research participants and their original identity was not stored in any way.

*Preventing disclosure of identities:* The names of participants have been changed. The only information given with data is the nationality and the study course of the student meaning that identification of participants is not possible.

### **3. 4 The literature review in grounded theory**

In this study I carried out an initial literature review despite the controversy of doing so in a grounded theory study. The original designers of grounded theory instructed fellow researchers to 'ignore the literary theory and fact' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 3) and to avoid carrying out a literature review because of the danger of being influenced unduly by the literature. Instead researchers should allow themes and categories to emerge naturally from the data to ensure that the theory is truly grounded in the original data collected by the researcher, and is not dominated by preconceived ideas (ibid). Glaser has continued to support the idea of avoiding a literature review (Glaser, 1998) but other grounded theory researchers, including Glaser's original partner Strauss (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), disagree with the avoidance of reviewing the literature for several reasons, not least because it is naïve to expect a researcher to be a 'blank slate' without experience and knowledge in the field of research they are working in (Charmaz, 2006). There are also other reasons for including a literature review before carrying out research including the need to find a gap in the literature and to avoid 'rediscovering the wheel' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

Having considered the advantages and disadvantages of an early literature review, I decided it would be advantageous to sensitize myself to the main issues in regard to international students studying at university in the United Kingdom and to contextualize this research project in my mind. The review also served as a mechanism through which I could objectively summarise and put down my understanding of the substantive area as a precursor to shedding my preconceptions and starting the data collection refreshed. It should be emphasized at this point that the literature review was not intended to be an exhaustive review of literature in the field: it was a starting point for the research and it was always expected that new literature would be included as needed in the discussion sections that follow in later chapters as is usual in grounded theory research studies. The approach taken in this study was to engage in a relatively short literature review before data collection with the intention of returning to the field during the time of data analysis when the new literature would be treated as further data and woven into a final grounded theory.

### **3.5 Research population and sampling**

The research population for this research was the international student body at my university in the south west of England. The university is a former polytechnic which gained university status after the 1992 higher education legislation and in 2013-14 had an enrollment of 26,930, 7% of whom were classed as domiciled outside the UK and the EU. (The Complete University Guide, 2016). The institution was ranked at position 79 (out of 126) in a national university league table in 2015 (ibid). Unpublished statistics collected from the university's corporate information system show that during the academic year

2012-13 when this research was started there were 1488 international students enrolled in the university (PUCIS, 2015).

The university's International Student Advisory Service annually creates an email list for administrative purposes which comprises all international students in the university and this was exploited as a means to ask for volunteers to take part in the study. This initial method of seeking out suitable research participants from the wider university student body can be considered as an example of purposive sampling (Cohen and Manion, 2000). This approach, combined with volunteer sampling, resulted in a number of international students coming forward and offering to be interviewed. As my research progressed, a process of theoretical sampling (discussed in section 3.7.3) enabled me to focus on Asian and Middle-Eastern postgraduate students. At the end of an interview, I always thanked the interviewee and the interviewee often responded by suggesting friends who could also be interviewed. I always responded by giving the interviewee a 'post-it note' with my name and email details for the interviewee to pass on to their friend so they could contact me if they were interested. I resisted the temptation to contact them directly as I did not want them to feel pressurized to take part in the research.

### **3.6 Interviewing**

#### **3.6.1 Why interviews?**

Gathering data through interviewing is a popular grounded theory research method. The researcher 'seeks to understand what is going on as people resolve their main concern in a given substantive area' (Nathaniel, 2008, p. 1). When the interviewee feels valued they will feel encouraged to talk and once they realise that they are being heard the story will flow. Glaser describes this

as 'instilling a spill' (Glaser, 1998, p. 111). It is the job of the interviewer to develop one question that will trigger the telling of a story which will spill out.

The most important point is that theories emerge from the data and the researcher will eventually recognise concepts and patterns of behaviour. The focus of a grounded theory research is the participants' own perception of a problem in their lives and their struggle to resolve the problem. New knowledge will only be arrived at by listening attentively to participants' stories.

'At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience' (Seidman, 2006, p. 23). This is the justification for choosing interviews with international students in this study. Interviewing research participants means granting them status: 'at the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth' (ibid) and it means attempting to enter their worlds.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) claim that despite the myriad of purposes, styles and designs of in-depth qualitative interviews, they share three important features: that they are built on a naturalistic interpretive philosophy, they are extensions of ordinary conversations, and lastly that the participants are 'partners' in the research project not subjects under examination. 'Qualitative research is not simply learning about a topic, but also learning what is important to those being studied' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 15). Rubin and Rubin draw a stark distinction between positivist and naturalistic-interpretive paradigms noting that in positivist research knowledge is neutral politically and socially. Such knowledge is gained by gathering a lot of information and facts in a systematic way in order to discover things that exist independently of our perceptions.

However in a more interpretivist paradigm the researcher can acknowledge that different versions of the same event can be true at the same time. Whereas a positivist researcher would develop standard questions to discover the facts, the post-positivist researcher would attempt to discover the participants' thoughts and feelings.

Charmaz (2006) appreciates the opportunities that interviewing brings to understand the research participant's life: '...Qualitative interviewing provides an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight.....interviewing is a flexible, emergent technique; ideas and issues emerge during the interview and interviewers can immediately pursue these leads..' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 29).

### **3.6.2 How to interview**

Rubin and Rubin (2005) argue for what they call 'responsive interviewing' in which the specific focus of research emerges from the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. The aim of the interview in grounded theory is to allow the main concern to emerge from the study – that is the 'spill' previously mentioned when participants feel that their stories are valued and being heard that is when, according to Nathaniel (2008) 'the story flows'. Nathaniel points out the importance of putting research participants at ease, and doing everything possible to initiate this spill. The importance of easy questions, without jargon or false assumptions is stressed. For Nathaniel with the right surroundings spill might be achieved with very simple starter questions such as *Tell me about when...*, *What was it like when...* Spill is likely to occur if the scene is well set, and if the informant's experience is felt to be valuable: theory

emerges from stories that people tell about a concern they have experienced. Strategies to encourage spill include asking open-ended questions and displaying listening skills (Nathaniel, 2008).

Charmaz (2006) similarly suggests devising a few broad open-ended questions for a grounded theory study because by asking creating open-ended no-judgmental questions unanticipated stories can emerge. She encourages the use of prompts such as: *that sounds interesting. Can you tell me more about that?* Unlike in an ordinary conversation an interviewer can shift focus and follow hunches. Amongst other benefits of in depth interviewing, this research method allows researchers to explore an experience which is being described, stop and request more detail and explanation, change pace, use a variety of skills to gently probe for more understanding of events and allows for the researcher to respect and show appreciation to the participant. Charmaz (2006) reminds researchers of the need to: keep attuned to how far the participant is willing to go, so the interviewer is constantly assessing the interview and its possibilities; listen carefully for opportunities and ideas to pursue; choose questions carefully and ask them slowly in order to foster the participants' reflections. Charmaz does not take a formal schedule into the interview preferring to keep it informal and conversational. Charmaz's principles of interviewing include:

- The comfort level of the participant outweighing the benefit of getting interesting data
- Paying close attention to probing and often just listening
- Trying to understand the experience from the participants' view and to validating its significance to this person

- Slanting ending questions to the positive so ending the interview on a positive note
- Avoiding ending the interview abruptly after the most searching questions or when interviewee is distressed.

Charmaz also suggests three different stages of questions: firstly initial open-ended questions (such as tell me about when); then a second stage of intermediate questions, and then finally ending questions (*Is there anything you would like to ask me? Is there anything else you would like to say?*)

Glaser (1998) discourages recording of interviews, recommending instead that researchers take notes. There are many reasons given for this, the most important probably being that, despite expectations, this process will slow down the process of analysis. Recording of the interview means further listening and transcription instead of making quick and immediate field notes. Glaser argues that the long process of recording and transcribing can add months of unnecessary work to a research project and can make theoretical sampling difficult. Glaser also discourages recording because people will hesitate to disclose sensitive information. His advice is to listen and if it is necessary to take notes, to do so inconspicuously. In this research I trialled two methods: the first two interviews were recorded and the next two were not recorded and notes were taken instead. After the first two interviews, substantial time was spent listening to the interviews afterwards and writing them up. The process of playing the interviews, stopping the recording, writing up, playing some more, was found to be extremely laborious. With the second method, the interviews were written up immediately after the interviews were held, from field notes taken at the time, a process which used a fraction of the time that the first

process had used. The quality of the resulting data was comparable in both cases. I found that in the second process I was able to start analysing the data immediately as I wrote it up as I found that my focus was on the meaning of the content rather than its form. I decided not to record subsequent interviews and this resulted in a far more positive research experience. As I continued to interview participants and my skills developed, I became better at recognising key indicators in the data which pointed out emerging properties and I realised the importance of capturing some student comments word for word. In such cases I found that students were happy to pause when I indicated that I wanted time to write and I could make verbatim notes.

### **3.6.3 Trustworthiness, reliability and validity**

Researchers must be aware of a myriad of possible issues that may come into play during the interview. During interviews participants may recite things that they think the researcher wants to hear, or they may have their own political agenda to get a particular message out to those they consider powerful. Themes of gender, race and age may also affect the interview – in terms of direction and content.

One question that researchers may ask themselves is *how do we know that the participant is saying is true?* And even if it is true for this participant, *is it true for anyone else? Would we get a different meaning from a different interviewer? And if it was done at a different time of day?* These are questions in validity and reliability that qualitative researchers regularly have to deal with. Lincoln and Guba (1985) prefer the notion of 'trustworthiness' to validity. Instead of the quantitative terms of validity and reliability they argue for: credibility (that the findings can be considered to be true in that they reflect reality), transferability



(that the findings are applicable and relevant to other contexts), dependability (that the findings are consistent), and confirmability (that the research is free of researcher bias). As previously mentioned, qualitative research, does not attempt to set out a positivist view of the world which can be cross checked using triangulation, or a variety of methods. It could be argued that a grounded theory interview could never be reliable, as it is a once in a lifetime event which cannot be replicated. Bush (2007) suggests that reliability might not even be desirable and that there may well be a trade-off between reliability and validity and that validity may be more important. Others (Kincheloe and McLaren 1998; Bassegy, 1999 in Bush, 2007) even question the importance of validity in such a research situation and suggest instead that researchers should focus on trustworthiness.

I argue here, in this grounded theory study which draws data from individuals who open up to me as a trusted interviewer, that trustworthiness is the most relevant quality to be considered. As Lietz *et al.* (2006) claim, trustworthiness is achieved when findings reflect the meanings as described by the participants as closely as possible. In this study I believe that the number of in depth interviews undertaken and the process of data analysis serve as triangulation. It has been said that research which only uses data through interviews is dangerous and triangulation of methods is essential (Guba and Lincoln, 1981, in Ribbins, 2007). However, Ribbins points out that the topic of what people say about something can be studied by interview alone.

Glaser (1998) is always concerned about interviewers forcing interview data into preconceived categories. There is a very real danger of the researcher imposing his or her concepts, concerns and discourse upon the participant: he

recommends keeping questions open-ended as much as possible to avoid this. Seidman (2006) admits that interviewers are part of the interviewing process and therefore need to be aware of bias. However, for Seidman the human factor is not treated in a negative way. He considers that in in-depth interviewing the human interviewer is affirmed – instead of decrying that fact he celebrates the way the human interviewer can be an adaptable, smart, flexible instrument who can respond to situations with skill, tact and understanding.

Cultural differences between interviewer and interviewee can make the interview process considerably more difficult because communication across cultures can be loaded with ‘subjectivity, personal perception and experience’ (Dimmock, 2007, p. 63). Shah (2004) believes that the differences in perceptions can lead to misunderstandings, particularly when the interviewer and the interviewee share meaning too easily. The danger is that the shared assumptions that occur in monocultural situations are copied across inappropriately to cross cultural situations. The in-depth interview may be particularly prone to such issues as the interviewer is assigning meaning to comments as he or she listens to them and this is done using shared frames of reference which can be misleading.

Cross-cultural interviewing requires care and awareness of the whole interview event. When interviewees respond to the interviewer they are responding not just to the question or the prompt itself but the whole situation they find themselves in. Participants may find that they end up saying more than they intended to (Ball, 1994, in Shah, 2004). Shah believes that it will be helpful if the interviewer is familiar with the participants’ culture. Barna (1998) notes six challenges in intercultural communication: inappropriate assumptions of

similarities, language, sign-language misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety.

I realised that these cross-cultural issues were highly relevant to my research with international students. Given my extensive experience in teaching English I considered myself in a good position to collect trustworthy data but I still needed to guard against misunderstandings. For this reason during the interviews I decided to check meaning carefully by the use of phrases such as *Are you saying that... It sounds like you felt....* I also followed up interviews with an email to interviewees saying thank you with a summary list of bullet points of things that they had said during the interview. This gave participants an opportunity to either correct misunderstandings or withdraw their data entirely. Participants in this study did not offer any corrections to summaries that I sent them.

It is also important to admit to the possibility of personal bias in this study. The study and thesis is largely one person's work, although support has been sought and provided throughout the research and writing up process. I have been acutely conscious of the lecturing position that I hold within the university and have constantly questioned my ability to collect and analyse data without bias. This awareness of possible bias, supervisory input, and the use of a rigorous methodological process all play a role in addressing this issue.

With reflection it is possible to see the development of my skills as an interviewer: from early awkward initial interviews with a voice recorder to a far more relaxed and confident researcher with a pen and notebook. In the latter stages of research I found that simple questions such as *Tell me about a time when...* could achieve the 'spill' which grounded theory researchers crave for. Often a simple facial expression could encourage participants to talk further

about their concerns and the behaviour they engaged in to tackle those concerns. I did not attempt to include participants from my own classes as I believed that the power issues would be too complex: I could not expect that students whose coursework I would be marking would talk openly and honestly about their concerns and the strategies that they use in their work.

### **3.7 Generating a grounded theory**

Having identified the area of substantive research and undertaken a preliminary and limited literature review, I followed the stages of a typical Glaserian grounded research project which went through the stages of:

- Collecting data
- Open coding of the data
- Writing memos
- Selective coding and theoretical sampling
- Sorting memos and finding theoretical codes
- Reading the literature and using it as further data
- Writing up the theory

(Scott, 2009).

#### **3.7.1 Collecting data and open coding the data**

The simultaneous collection and analysis of data in grounded theory has the beneficial effect of directing the researcher's efforts in the correct directions. The immediate analysis of my data enabled me to collect more data around emerging themes and I was able to focus on emerging theories and test these out in following interviews. Grounded theorists advocate constantly changing the questions being asked to interviewees, adding interesting questions, and

leaving out ones which do not bring out useful data. Charmaz's most important rule (1995) is to study the emerging data in order to try to understand the implicit meanings in it. 'Your respondents will live in your mind as you listen carefully over and over to what they say.' (Charmaz, 1995, p. 36). I was able to do this by allowing interviewees to expand upon themes which previous interviewees had also discussed, without forcing the data.

The initial, or open, coding was the first stage of analyzing the data. In this step I attributed labels to the data. I noticed a frustrating lack of detail given over to how to do this by Glaser and Strauss in their early works. However, more recently research writers (Saldana, 2009) have made this process more explicit. It has been said that this first step of coding means 'coding everything for everything' (Scott, 2009). For Charmaz (2006) this stage of coding means naming segments of data so the label categorises, summarises and accounts for each bit of data. For all grounded theorists coding is the essential step between collecting data and developing a theory to explain it. This first coding was done by analyzing data in small chunks, attributing labels to phrases, lines, sentences or paragraphs. This process produced a number of labels which were analysed, sorted, carried forward, and rejected in later stages. These initial codes were a mixture of ideas, feelings, actions which emerged from the data, but the process ensured that Glaser's rule of studying the emerging data (Glaser, 1978) was being followed. An early example of initial coding is shown in appendix E.

The process of data collection and analysis in grounded theory is a process of conceptualization which enables the researcher to see 'the bigger picture' (Glaser, 1998, p. 133). At this early stage of analysis the raw data can be

considered to be at conceptual level one; it is the process of analysis which moves it to conceptual level two. This move takes place as the data is coded for the first time. As described above, this process meant applying labels to sections of data and beginning to group these sections, or incidences together which would result in the formation of substantive codes.

Early on in the PhD process Nvivo was identified as the most appropriate software package to use to store and analyse qualitative data. However, it soon became clear that Nvivo was getting in between me and my data. As discussed earlier, initially I recorded and transcribed early interviewees and attempted to manage the data in Nvivo. Substantial time was being spent in coming to grips with the software and there was a real danger that the software was taking centre stage of the PhD process instead of the data. Being a lone researcher with a relatively small number of research participants, I decided that I would stop using Nvivo and manually analyse and code my data using Microsoft Word, paper and pencil, and a wall of a home office. By sticking up bits of paper, highlighting, cutting and pasting digitally and manually, matching, note-making, drawing and constantly redrawing mind maps, and memoing in Word, the codes emerged from the data. The wall of the home office reflected the progress of the data analysis process, with different areas of the wall being slowly given over to the emerging codes, with arrows drawn to show the links between the different categories. This approach meant that I was able to see the 'bigger picture' all the time, and retained an overview of how the codes fitted together to make one cohesive grounded theory. This would not have been possible on a small screen.

### **3.7.2. Writing memos**

Saldana (2009) considers memo writing as a place for the researcher to 'dump your brain' about the research they are carrying out (Saldana, 2009, p. 41). Saldana claims that every qualitative researcher agrees that whenever anything occurs to the researcher about their coding or their data that they should immediately write a memo about this. This memo can be notes, or prose, capturing the researchers' ideas and insights into the data and emerging codes. Saldana also believes that this memo writing will in itself also serve as an additional code and category generating methodology.

Charmaz (1995) describes memo-writing as 'the crucial intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers' (Charmaz, 1995, p. 27). In memo-writing researchers will reflect on their codes and the process helps the researcher to shape and form ideas emerging from the early analysis of their data. For Charmaz, it is through memo-writing that you see which categories are important, add to them, and compare what different people said during different interviews. Amongst other things, memo writing also: helps the researcher to stop and thinking about their data; develop their voice; avoid forcing the data; develop fresh ideas and concepts; discover gaps, being to build whole sections of papers and chapters and to increase the confidence and competence of the researcher.

I found the memo writing an essential part of the conceptualization process. Memo writing was found to be akin to a brainstorming activity, which initially threw up a huge number of possible concepts, which were then whittled down through a later memo sorting process. In this project memos were electronic Word documents which were printed out and stored in plastic folders for ease of reading and access. An early memo showing thoughts that I had after an

interview is presented in appendix F. Memos were written spontaneously without concern for their presentation and were made throughout the duration of data analysis from the stage of open coding through to writing up the final grounded theory. The memos provided important records of the thought processes involved in theory generation and were referred to constantly throughout the process of theory generation.

### **3.7.3 Theoretical sampling and selective coding**

The initial purposive sampling of international students had resulted in a number of volunteers coming forward and offering to be interviewed, all of whom were Asian and Middle-Eastern postgraduate students. Although the full range of international students was invited to participate (including undergraduates and European students) only Asian and Middle-Eastern postgraduate students responded. Although I had not intended to exclude other students, once the data collection had begun and the codes suggested that these particular students faced issues and concerns that might well not be shared by students coming from other regions or closer to the UK, it was decided to continue to focus on this group of international students. This was done by passing on my contact details to participants who suggested that I interviewed their friends and not actively seeking European students for interview. I never had to reject an offer of an interview during the research process. The ongoing selection of research participants in this way is termed *theoretical sampling* (Glaser, 1978) and differs from sampling in other research methodologies in which participants are chosen because they are representative of a larger population and which results can be generalized to. Theoretical sampling lead to consolidation of emerging categories as I kept looking for new data, asking similar interview



questions to research participants, reinforcing concepts until I was confident of the categories.

The process of initial coding and memo writing which took place immediately afterwards and alongside interviews gradually revealed the main concern of the participants and the core category, after which selective, or focused coding, was used on only the core category and related categories. This selective coding is therefore a parallel process to theoretical sampling. Charmaz considers this coding a more conceptual type of coding than initial coding: 'Focused coding means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data....it requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorise your data incisively and completely' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). The strength of grounded theory coding comes from this concentrated active involvement with the data: the data is acted upon, interacted with, not passively accepted. Focused coding prevented my preconceptions about the topic, condensed the data and put handles on them during the emergent process.

Glaser (1998) describes the practice of selective coding and constant comparison of incidents occurring in the data – incidents that occur again and again – until saturation is reached. Saturation is reached when further comparison of incidents reveal no new categories, that is, the category can be considered as complete and can become part of the final grounded theory.

In this project the data emerging was gradually organized into five categories and the properties of the categories emerged concurrently with the categories themselves. The categories included the core category *Making the grade* which

arched over and integrated the other categories and which provided the basis for the final grounded theory.

#### **3.7.4 Sorting memos and finding theoretical codes**

Sorting memos and finding theoretical codes can be the most challenging part of the process of grounded theory (Glaser, 2005). Glaser describes theoretical codes as the abstract models that emerge during the memo sorting stage and quotes many researchers who struggle with this aspect of grounded theory. Again and again Glaser warns against forcing our own codes onto the data, researchers instead need to let the theoretical codes emerge. These theoretical codes are the abstract models, or theories, which pull the categories together and make sense of them. These abstractions provide the model for theory generation. Glaser believes that where the initial coding is straightforward, theoretical coding takes place at a far more conceptual level and these codes are often missed by researchers. It is this theoretical coding which allows the earlier codes to be integrated into a theory – it involves a process of conceptualization which allows researchers to see the big picture. The grounded theory method of data analysis moves the raw data collected from the field (which can be considered as conceptual level one), to conceptual level two where categories and their properties emerge. At conceptual level three, the theory is gleaned from the categories.

This ongoing process developed my ability to identify and develop theoretical codes. The theoretical links that emerged between the core category *Making the grade* were eventually woven together into a coherent grounded theory which works up from the data which is the starting point. After the core category was found and what was going on had been identified, these codes showed

how it was happening. The core category in this project suggested that successful international students go through an essential process of identity change and this included affirmation of their developing identity.

Rereading and sorting memos played a vital role in this third conceptual level of theory generation. The data was derived from the memos which had been made during the long process of initial coding, theoretical sampling and interviewing. By constantly revisiting memos connections were made between codes and properties, and these connections were further sorted and grouped together. In this way the overarching core category of *Making the grade* emerged as the bond between the other codes. This process of emergence is meant to ensure that the researcher has not forced their own ideas onto the data. In order to avoid this, I strived to remain open-minded about what the data was saying and worked from the memos rather than the original raw data in developing the theory.

### **3.7.5 Reading the literature and using it as further data**

As previously mentioned the role of literature review in grounded theory is much discussed and confusing for the new grounded theory researcher. Some grounded theory researchers do not undertake an initial literature review at all and, in that case, this stage of the research project is the first time they approach literature in their field. I had carried out a brief literature review and at this point I returned to the literature and could pinpoint exactly which literature to focus on and treated it as further data to be included in theory generation.

McGhee *et al.* (2007) consider that the timing of the literature review is not the most important aspect of the research, what is important is the inductivity of the grounded theory and building in reflexivity. The constant comparison method should stop the forcing of data and should prevent the preconceptions that could potentially occur from an early literature review.

I found that a return to the literature, and visits to new literature which was indicated as important by the data, during the process of data analysis, was an essential part of the conceptualization and theory generation process. Once the substantive codes and their properties had begun to emerge it was possible to incorporate relevant literature into them. The literature supported and pushed the conceptualization process forward and provided more data to be woven into the emerging theory. The emerging theory took me into the field of poststructuralist identity theory which had not been explored previous to the start of the analysis of the data and had been barely touched upon in the original literature review: the emergence of new issues is to be expected in grounded theory and to some extent shows that the researcher has not 'forced' the data which is what Glaser often warns about.

The complex iterative nature of grounded theory generation is effectively illustrated in Figure 3, originally created by Lehmann (Lehmann, 2001, in Fernandez, 2004) and adapted by Fernandez (2004). Lehmann represented the process of grounded theory as a spiral which begins with 'slices of data' (Fernandez, 2004, p. 84) in the area of the research which, through a continuing process are, are codified and categorised until saturation occurs which results in concepts becoming densified into a grounded theory.

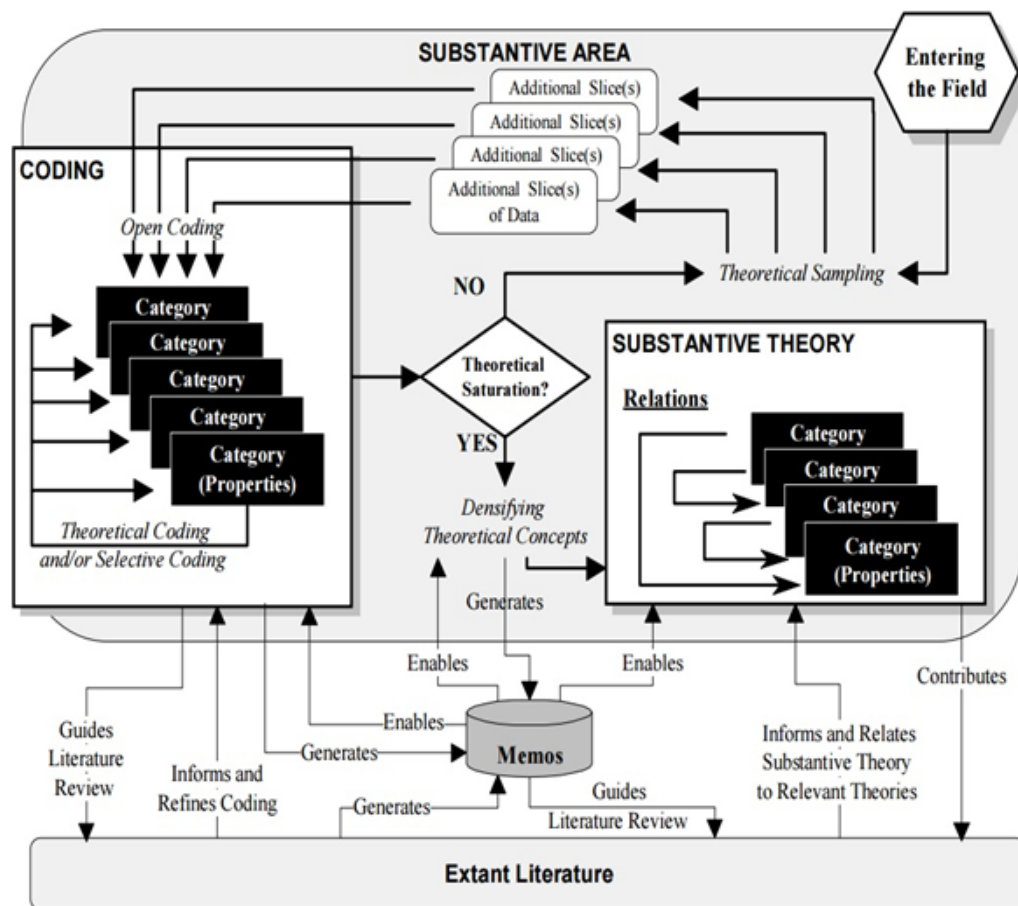


Figure 3: Grounded theory's building processes (expanded) (Fernandez, 2004, p.85), adapted from Lehmann (2001)

### 3.7.6 Writing up the theory

The final step in the methodology was writing up the final theory which had been generated and which explained all the data. The core category which had emerged represented the main issue in the study from the research participants' perspectives. The theory was written up in the order in which it is presented here: presenting and discussing the substantive codes one by one finishing with the core category itself. Writing up the theory involves expressing theoretical links in the form of hypotheses that 'weave the fractured story back together'

(Glaser, 1978, p. 72). The ultimate result is a coherent theory grounded in the data. The findings and discussions for each code are presented in this project alongside each other, which reflects how grounded theory takes place: an ongoing revision of data and literature. Glaser (1998) recommends writing about theory in abstract (away from time and place) because the findings become theoretical hypotheses. However, I preferred to refer back to data to tie the theory as closely as possible to the data. The findings of the sub-categories are presented before the core category because they are properties of this core category.

This chapter has presented the justification for and the steps involved in carrying out a grounded theory study. The ultimate justification for adopting grounded theory methodology is best summarised by Glaser himself (1998):

*It is about time that researchers study the problem that exists for the participants in the area, not what is supposed to exist or what a professional says is important....grounded theory requires that it is the relevance of the people in the substantive area under study. It is their main concern and their continual processing of it that is the focus of grounded theory. (p. 16)*

Bearing in mind that the focus of grounded theory is the main concern of the people in the substantive area under study, the next section of my thesis presents a summary of those concerns.

# Chapter Four: Theoretical codes, properties and hypotheses

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## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical codes which I discovered, their properties and their hypotheses. The main concerns of the international students are briefly introduced, as are the ways that students responded to those concerns. The chapter lays the foundation for full discussion of the findings and discussion in subsequent chapters.

## 4.2 Struggling to communicate

Theoretical code	<i>Struggling to communicate</i>
Properties and subproperties	<i>Being disadvantaged (Falling back, Clutching at straws) Feeling foolish Building confidence</i>
Hypothesis	<i>International students consider competence in English language to be the key contributing factor to living and studying successfully in the UK. They consider language competence to be the gateway to academic success and to building relationships with British students and the host society. International students feel that their language skills are not of the required standard and they feel disadvantaged having to operate in their second language. Because of this they often fall back on their first language which they use during background reading and study. Students with weaker language skills may resort to desperate measures in their attempts to succeed in their studies. They feel foolish because they do not have the sociolinguistic skills to communicate properly with native English speakers but they build confidence when their English skills improve.</i>

Table 2: Struggling to communicate

*Struggling to communicate* was the first main theme to emerge from this research study. In the first interview that I carried out, the student's preoccupation with his English language skills was immediately apparent. In this interview 42 different initial codes were used to describe chunks of text, and 17 of these were related to English language skills. I also wrote three memos during that time of coding to keep track of thoughts that were occurring to me as I worked and these discussed the importance of having good English language skills, the value of students helping each other in their study, and the frustration and disappointment that this particular student felt in working hard and getting low marks.

The analysis of this first interview was done at a busy time in the university year which meant that after my initial open coding of the interview I had to put the research down for several days in order to carry on with my teaching responsibilities. The advantage of this was that when I returned to my data and looked at it again, I immediately saw that several of the codes I had written for the data were repetitive: I had used different codes for incidents which actually indicated the same idea. I grouped several together, reduced the number of codes to 28, and started to write codes which were more theoretical and less descriptive. Although I had read extensively about the grounded theory method before starting any data analysis, Glaser's 'process of conceptualisation' (Glaser, 1998, p. 133) started to make proper sense to me and I began to realise the procedure of moving data up to higher conceptual levels. I understood the need to form major categories for my theory, and to break those categories down, where appropriate, into properties and subproperties. After my first interview I had *The importance of English*, *Group work*, and *Frustrated* as codes which I thought would be important themes in organising my data.



Every interviewee talked about the importance of having good English language skills and initially there were more codes in regard to language skills than for other issues for the students and at one point I thought this was emerging as the core category. However for a long time I remained unhappy with the category title. Other possible titles for *Struggling to communicate* were: *The importance of English, Language, English language, Language deficiency, and Having to use a second language*. As I wrestled with the name of the category, I read again of the need to consider the main concern of the participants (Glaser, 1998) and realised the basic underlying concern was that of communication, and I understood 'communicating' needed to be in the title in some form. I reviewed the memos I had written and became more aware than ever of the struggle that my interviewees experienced. The phrase *Struggling to communicate* finally emerged which explained one of the students' main concerns and their experience of living in the UK. As I continued to code and make notes and write memos about data relating to *Struggling to communicate*, a number of possible subproperties presented themselves, including: (*The difficulty of) studying in a second language/socialising in a second language, the importance of language for building friendships, feeling inadequate, relying on L1 when L2 is weak*. These all developed into firmer conceptual codes which were bound together by a hypothesis which was generated to explain how the concepts fitted together.

### 4.3 Being an outsider

Theoretical code	<i>Being an outsider</i>
Properties and subproperties	<i>Reaching out</i> <i>Being ignored</i> <i>Recreating home</i>
Hypothesis	<i>International students suffer detachment from the home student body and the host society. They make attempts to reach out to native English speakers but they feel that their attempts are rebuffed and this causes them to feel excluded, ignored, and this has a negative impact on their self-esteem. They lack social and cultural capital because their skills and knowledge are not valued in their new academic environment and they feel ignored. As a result of this they turn to co-nationals and recreate their home environment.</i>

Table 3: Being an outsider

Initial coding of data taken from the next two interviews showed fewer codes relating to the issue of language, but more which later contributed to the emergence of *Being an outsider*. This shift in focus of student concern slowed my identification of the core category: I realised that I had been in danger of ‘forcing the data’ (Glaser, 1998, p. 81) and that what I needed to do was to continue with the process of coding, constant comparison and memoing and let the data speak for itself. From the second interview I initially coded 12 references which in the end related to *Being an outsider*. As with other codes, they were initially overly descriptive; examples of these were: *feeling homesick*, *being left out during group work* and *not knowing what to talk about with home students*. The process of refining descriptive codes into theoretical concepts eventually led me to the terms *Being an outsider*, *Reaching out*, *Being ignored* and *Recreating home*, phrases which again had taken months to emerge.

#### 4.4 The challenge

Theoretical code	<i>The challenge</i>
Properties and subproperties	<i>Bridging the gap</i> <i>Catching up</i> <i>Daunted</i>
Hypothesis	<i>International students are surprised at the challenge they face when they take up their studies in the UK. They are poorly prepared for how difficult it is to live and study in a foreign country and in a second language. They have to work hard to bridge the gap that exists between their academic and sociocultural skills and those needed in the UK. They sometimes feel that they need to catch up with knowledge and skills. Overall they feel daunted when they realise the size of the challenge they face in studying in the UK.</i>

Table 4: The challenge

The emergence of *The challenge* as a category and its properties *Bridging the gap*, *Catching up* and *Daunted* is a good example of how coding had fractured the data into separate fragments which were then woven back together by conceptualisation. Interviewees all discussed such a wide number of different challenges which they faced that I was concerned about how to present them in a meaningful way. Over a period of several weeks I considered different ways of grouping the difficulties that my participants discussed and I experimented with phrases such as: *short term challenges*, *long term challenges*, *academic difficulties* and *everyday survival*. As I continued to read and consider grounded theory methodology and continued to analyse my data, my descriptive codes became less descriptive and more conceptual. This process of conceptualisation collapsed a large number of codes into the simple concepts *Bridging the gap*, *Catching up* and *Daunted* which summarised the student experience and explained what was really happening for my interviewees.

## 4.5 Supporting each other

Theoretical code	<i>Supporting each other</i>
Properties and subproperties	<i>Surviving together</i> <i>Learning together</i> <i>Struggling together</i>
Hypothesis	<i>International students provide emotional, practical and academic support to each other within 'communities of practice' which are often the primary support mechanisms available to them. The academic support they offer to each other is not always reliable because it is offered by other international students who may not be experts. It can be difficult to influence the practice that students share in their communities of practice and the communities of practice can act as barriers between different groups of people.</i>

Table 5: Supporting each other

It quickly became clear to me that the international students I talked to relied a great deal on a network of fellow students with similar backgrounds to their own for a range of types of support and that this aspect of international student life would play an important role in describing and explaining their experiences. A large number of initial descriptive and disparate codes were, over time, summarised and crystallised into the category *Supporting each other* and its properties *Surviving together*, *Learning together* and *Struggling together* which reflected the principal areas of collaboration between international students. Earlier attempts at coding had included, amongst others, the terms *relying on co-nationals* and *the importance of co-nationals*. The term *Struggling together* which applies to the concept of students lending guidance to fellow students even though they themselves might not be in a position to do so took the longest time to emerge. It replaced a previous phrase *working in the dark* which I had used but which I was unhappy with.

#### 4.6 Making the grade

Theoretical code	<i>Making the grade</i>
Properties and subproperties	<i>Shifting identities</i> <i>Investing</i> <i>Gaining legitimacy</i>
Hypothesis	<i>International students engage in a process of identity change during their stay in the UK. This change explains how they respond to the challenges they face. This process of change reflects the multiple and changing nature of their identities. They invest in their learning and as they learn the skills that they need to become successful they gain legitimacy and eventually Make the grade.</i>

Table 6: Making the grade

Glaser (1978) describes the identification of the core category in a grounded theory study as a process of breaking the data down into substantive codes during line by line coding and comparing incidents with one another until the core category emerges. In this study, the core category *Making the grade* took a considerable amount of time to emerge and it was not until it did that I properly appreciated the difference between important categories and the *core* category which explained the fundamental social process that the research participants engaged with. *Making the grade*, which refers to the identify change that international students undergo, had taken longer to conceptualise than previous categories and was not readily apparent from the initial coding I had carried out. I realised that to some extent it had lain hidden beneath the more obvious categories which students themselves were more conscious of and which they had articulated more clearly.

A breakthrough in discovering the core category came when I was revisiting data and coding that I had processed some weeks previously. I had analysed a student's discussion of challenges she faced and she had told me how she had gone hungry in her first year because she couldn't manage things, but how things were better in her second year, and in her third year '*I can do it*'. When I looked back at the codes that I had originally produced I realised that my coding skills had developed markedly in the intervening period. I now saw I had applied descriptive codes to short pieces of text (such as *lacked survival skills, going hungry*) and I had missed the bigger unifying concept of personal change. The conceptualisation process took hold, and I realised that this concept occurred again and again throughout the data. As I continued to study my data I sought out new literature on personal identity and identity change and I recognised this as a key theme running through all the categories I had previously discovered and I became convinced that I had discovered my core category. This discovery stimulated a new rush of ideas and realisations, which encouraged me to write more memos, review previous ones, and to re-examine all my data and previous coding. In doing so I selectively coded for this core category and reinforced my findings.

Although the categories must be presented and discussed on paper in a linear fashion, in reality they relate closely to each other, and there is considerable overlap and sharing of concepts between the categories as the Figure 4 suggests:



Figure 4: The overlapping grounded theory

The following findings and discussion chapters expand the categories that are presented above. Giving each category its own separate chapter allows for full discussion of the different concepts and makes presenting the findings and discussion manageable.

# Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion *Struggling to communicate*

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## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the overwhelming level of concern that students experienced in regard to their English language ability. The detailed findings for *Struggling to communicate* are presented in the following pages with excerpts of data from all the participants in the study being put forward. The findings section is followed by a discussion of the category and its properties of *Being disadvantaged*, *Feeling foolish*, and *Building confidence*. *Falling back* and *Clutching at straws* form subproperties of *Being disadvantaged*.

The findings resonate with the literature which was consulted before the start of the research and which, in step with usual grounded theory procedure, was revisited during the data analysis process. This literature is discussed in depth in the discussion section below.

## 5.2 Findings: *Struggling to communicate*

The findings show how important students considered competence in English to be, and there was a universal lack of confidence amongst interviewees with their perceived level of competence in English. Research participants considered themselves to be living, studying and working in an environment where full and effective use of the English language was a requirement in order to participate properly in the social and academic situations that they found themselves in. They perceived that their English language skills were deficient;



they perceived themselves to be inadequate and this impacted negatively on their self-esteem and self-confidence. The students interviewed in this study very much wanted to be accepted by home students but felt that they lacked the language skills to engage with British students as equals.

Students generally felt that their English skills were not of a sufficient standard for their study requirements. They considered themselves to be disadvantaged and this resulted in them engaging in a number of strategies to manage this perceived deficiency. The strategies that students employed varied widely: while many addressed the deficiency directly by working on their English and seeking ways to improve their language skills, students also employed managing strategies such as accessing subject input in their first language, relying on co-nationals for support, and a number of more extreme measures which are discussed later in this section. In research interviews students did not appear to recognise or pay attention to the value of being bilingual, or appreciate their ability to operate in more than one language – they viewed their second language use of English as a deficiency, not an advantage.

A number of research participants discussed, unprompted, the language issue, and the importance they gave to English language competence was unparalleled in comparison to other issues they were concerned with. All the students who were interviewed in this study were unhappy with their level of English and this was even the case for students whom I considered to have excellent English language skills. The impact on their academic lives is expressed in the property *Being disadvantaged*. The way students fall back on their L1 skills emerges as the subproperty *Falling back*. The other subproperty *Clutching at straws* describes how students, under pressure, reach out for short

term fixes to their academic problems which result from their weak English language skills. The impact that perceived poor language skills had on their social lives emerges as the property labelled *Feeling foolish*. The way that students reacted positively to their perceived language inadequacy by improving their language skills is described through the property *Building confidence*.

The inadequacy that students perceived in regard to their language skills is typified in the following excerpts of discussions with research participants who raised the issue of language themselves in answer to a general question about being an international student in the UK.

Maggie was a PhD student from Thailand who, during her interview, claimed to have had extremely poor English language skills at the start of her studies. The opening remarks of her interview clearly put the language issue at the top of her list of concerns:

*Me: What's it like being an international student in Plymouth?*

*Maggie: The hardest thing is writing in English. Especially at first. But it's better now.*

Bolin, a Chinese PhD student, brought up his language skills when he was discussing his general lifestyle. He started by commenting on positive aspects of his life in the UK before picking up on the difficulty of language:

*Bolin: ...Overall I like living and studying here. Every coin has two sides. The biggest thing on the other side is that my English is not fluent. I can't express my ideas very well...*

Adam, a Malaysian student, voiced his disappointment with his level of English. His comments arose from a general question about living in the UK rather than a probe about language in particular. I believe that this shows the strength of feeling in this aspect of adapting to life in the UK:

*Me: Is it your first time in the UK?*

*Adam: Actually it's my first time out of Malaysia. But although people are friendly I have common problems. People speak too fast and I have to ask them to repeat...our English is not a good level.*

It is interesting to note Adam's use of the collective 'our' when he discusses his weakness even though there had been no previous discussion of other students. The suggestion of his international student group membership is an aspect of international student life picked up in later categories in this study. Adam's next comments show the worry that students encounter in regard to their English language skills:

*Adam: I am struggling...I was worried because I had to take the IELTS test....*

Here he refers to the standard English language assessment which students who have English as a second language take to prove their English language ability before taking up their studies. But despite meeting the language requirement for the university, Adam's 'struggling' remark shows his lack of comfort in regard to his English skills.

Zikri from Malaysia considered that having English as a second language was an extra hurdle for him to overcome. When discussing challenges he commented:

*Zikri: Accents can take a few seconds to process so I have to use the context sometimes to understand what people are saying.*

*Me: What about the standard of your written English?*

*Zikri: ..it's as if I have to work extra hard...*

I considered Zikri's language skills to be excellent and the question arises to what extent international students are actually disadvantaged because of having English as a second language. This is explored in the later discussion section.

It emerged that international students feel that they are severely disadvantaged by having to study in their second language. One question used during the interviews elicited a number of comments about language and revealed the importance that students gave it:

*Me: What advice would you give to someone coming to study in the UK from your country?*

*Asma: I would tell my friends and family to send their children to study in the UK because English is very important.*

*Ahmed: I would tell students to study for a year in English before starting their PhD. Language is always changing. There are new English words all the time. Students have to learn them.*

*Pang: Do an English course before you study!*

*Maggie: I would tell a new person to go out and make contact with people. I'm lucky, when I met people they spoke slowly for me. Coming to terms with English is the main thing for me.*

Maggie's final comment underlines how many international students consider achieving a comfortable level of competence in English a key goal in their lives. These excerpts are a small sample of many instances where students stressed the important role that they believe English language skills play in academic success. Feng, a Chinese Masters student, clearly articulated the commonly held belief among international students that language held the key to getting good marks. During a conversation Feng discussed the difficulty for international students to achieve satisfactory marks. His disappointment with the marks that he had scored in his assessments was clear, so I probed further:

*Me: Do you think it's harder to get high marks in the UK than China?*

*Feng: I think it's harder in the UK.*

*Me: Why?*

*Feng: Actually I think mostly its language. Language is the problem.*

*Because when we start our assignment, the first part we need to read the question. And some questions, the lecturer states it very clearly for English speakers but Chinese students may be confused...*

Feng's comments show that he believed there to be a language barrier which prevented students understanding what it is they were being asked to do. Additionally, his data also showed that students perceived the importance of being able to write competently in English in order to get good marks. Feng displayed a keen desire to understand and gain the writing skills required of him. He sought out a successful student whom he knew had good marks and asked to look at her work to see what made her work so good. These

comments came as a result of a probe from me about how students might support each other during their studies:

*Me: Are there some star students who others ask for advice?*

*Feng: ...A lady, much older than me, she studied very well, she worked for years, she got 70%, a very high mark so I asked her can I read your assignment because they are very good.. I can also find this analysis, but the language and the connecting words were very good, fluent, the paper was like native speaker writing. But for myself maybe I can't explain very clearly. Very good analysis. Maybe a language problem, but I know this. Some students say I know this! If I write in Chinese – no problem. I know this.*

Feng's comment '*I know this!*' suggests frustration amongst ESL students: the belief they have that they know the content and if they were allowed to write in their own language then they would not have any problems. At this point in the conversation I wanted to make sure of the student's viewpoint and so asked another direct question:

*Me:: So you are saying it's a language problem?*

*Feng: Yes. This year I speak to lots of PhD students and language is still the problem....He [one of these students] needs to read complex sentences two or three times, so that is a problem sometimes.*

The discussion with Feng reveals the frustration that he feels that although he has complex ideas he can only express them in simple language:

*Feng: I think my English isn't good enough, just so-so. I can communicate with people with just simple sentences.. Not good enough for me. I need more academic English, I need more complex things...*

*Me: So you think your English needs to be a higher level?*

*Feng: Yes, and I stay here for four years and I am not satisfied with my English level.*

The concept of having inadequate language skills is clearly distinguishable in Feng's comments. He believed that poor use of English would impact negatively on marks given:

*Feng: ...Especially for higher education, language is very important. But poor English and very simple mistakes will lower my marks. So I think that's a problem.*

The following excerpt from a conversation with Alan, another Chinese Masters student, is another data sample supporting the emergence of the *Struggling to communicate* category. In this case Alan had suggested that he faced serious challenges during his study and I wanted him to be more explicit about them:

*Me: What's difficult about studying in the UK?*

*Alan: Language is top. I can't communicate normally. They can't understand me. In class I'm nervous – that I can't understand the teacher or the teacher can't understand me. And getting a high score is difficult. Even though we work very hard. Then I get 40 or 50% in coursework. I think it's because of language and the style of work is different....*

Alice, a Chinese PhD student, experienced a similar level of discomfort with her language skills. Again, her comments came unprompted in the middle of other comments she was making about the Chinese student community in general:

*Alice: .....It's another volunteer programme for Chinese to join to get into the local community [A theatre group she had talked about]. I'm not sure how many people have real local friends. My English is not good enough. Actually embarrassing. ...I had some misunderstandings with my tutor.*

The use of the word 'embarrassing' reflects a serious degree of discomfort and deficiency. Alice went on to explain how, alongside her PhD studies, she had taken up the role of tutor to some undergraduate students in her faculty and that a number of these had struggled in the academic environment because of their level of English. One student in particular who had directly into the third year of a degree programme from China struggled:

*Alice: It was his first year in the UK. His language was very poor. He needed to write a dissertation. His module leader came to me and asked me to be a tutor to him, to support him. He had lots of ideas but speaking and writing English was very hard for him.*

Miriam, a Masters student from China who had studied as an undergraduate top-up student in the UK and who then had continued in the UK with her postgraduate study, blamed language for her inability to perform adequately. Like Feng who knew what to do but struggled to do it in English, Miriam knew that she was expected to contribute but struggled to do so:

*Me: What things are particularly challenging for you?*



*Miriam: In the UK we have to respond to the teachers...I know I should respond, but I don't know how to...later on I think of things I could have said. When I want to say 'thank you' there are lots of different ways of saying it, but all I can do is to say 'thank you'. It's really hard...*

Miriam's reference to things being 'hard' contributes to another category, *The challenge*, discussed later in this piece of work. *The challenge* brings together a number of difficulties that students face. English language, being the biggest and most discussed challenge, qualifies for its own category.

Ahmed, an Iraqi PhD student had studied hard to be able to understand English within his subject area and got to the point where he claimed to be able to understand everything within his subject area. However, even that was not enough for him because he found himself restricted when he ventured outside his specialist subject area:

*Ahmed: I understand everything if it is an article in my subject. But if I read a new topic then I will have some problems.*

The feeling that international students had to work harder than British students because they were working in their second language was clearly expressed by a large number of research participants.

*Maggie: I think it's harder for me than for British students...sometimes I could hardly understand...I also work as a demonstrator in the university and I sometimes see that students don't understand what I'm saying. But it's a very good experience. .*

It is also revealing how central to international students' lives their study is – consequently difficulties in their studies are major difficulties in their lives.

The social impact of students feeling that their English language skills are inadequate are severe. ESL students appeared to be trapped in a vicious circle in which they were reluctant to take up or seek opportunities to interact with the host community because of fear of embarrassing situations where they might fail to communicate successfully. Thus they found themselves excluded from social situations which would provide the important language learning opportunities that they so desperately needed. Students consequently experienced low self-confidence and low self-esteem.

Miriam's comments provided me with great insight into how students clearly felt that their level of English prevented them from interacting meaningfully with others who didn't share their first language. I opened the interview with Miriam with a general comment about being interested in finding out about international students' experiences and Miriam's frustration at her lack of ability to build meaningful relationships with local people leapt out:

*Me: I'm interested in the experiences of international students...*

*Miriam: I say hello to local people. I say 'how are you?' You know, conversation format. I want to say other things, but don't. We want to talk deeply about a topic, but don't have the language. We miss a good chance to have a talk.*

Students were very aware that the difficulties they experienced in using English were not helped by their tendency to socialise with co-nationals. Alice, a Chinese student studying for a PhD reflected on her experience of being an undergraduate at university and how she spent her time with other Chinese students and the negative impact this had on her English language development:

*Alice: All Chinese students in the same group...this wasn't helpful for my English...*

Alice was not alone in making this observation. In another interview, a different student, Asma, from Saudi Arabia considered that her English language skills were actually getting worse because of the lack of interaction with British people. She felt that when she had been at a language school and been concentrating on her language surrounded by other language students with whom she could practise her language, her English language skills had rapidly improved. But now that she was out of the language school she found it much harder to actually speak English despite living in the UK and studying in a British university. As I explored the issue of language competence the following exchange occurred:

*Me: And how do you feel about your English skills?*

*Asma: It's got worse since I was at the language school...I'm not confident with my speaking. Sometimes I go a long time without speaking English.*

Certainly international students felt that their lack of proficiency in English hindered their interaction with home students and other members of the host society. Zikri, a Malaysian student who I considered to have very good communication skills very clearly articulated the discomfort that he felt in trying to communicate with British people:

*Zikri: There is a language barrier...we worry about how others might perceive us.. I'm scared of walking over and talking to somebody and*

*making a fool of myself. I don't know how to communicate. After a few pleasantries the conversation dies out, to an awkward silence.*

The same student described how he had been in the local swimming pool and had been asked something by some local people which he didn't understand and which caused them to become impatient with him. Zikri remembered the exchange because of the irritation he had inadvertently caused:

*Zikri: Last weekend...people asked me something..I didn't get it. I hesitated and it took me a few seconds to work it out and they got irritated with me because I couldn't answer it immediately. Accents can take a few seconds to process so I have to use the context sometimes to understand what people are saying.*

These ideas were explored with Maggie who tried to describe how her self-confidence suffered because she was unable to use English confidently and competently. Her words paint a picture of a person frustrated by her lack of ability to perform everyday tasks, and the effect this has on self-confidence is striking:

*Me: You've said something about English. It sounds important...*

*Maggie: If you are not confident with your English you are not confident with yourself....When I was new here I was scared to go to the Health Centre...this affects everything. Not confident to pick the phone...really hard...can't express yourself...*

The fear instilled by lack of confidence in English goes well beyond the general nervousness that the researcher had expected to hear about from research participants. Even the most mundane tasks could prove challenging to students

who were not competent and confident in their English, a point illustrated by Miriam from China who was talking about things which she found particularly challenging:

*Miriam: English language! When I got here, even buying a bottle of water was hard!*

Maggie was not the only student to use the word 'scared' to describe how she felt when she had to use English with British people. Cuifen who recently completed a Master's course used the same word to describe her reluctance to talk to British students:

*Cuifen: Especially at first you are scared to speak in the lectures, apart from with my two Chinese friends..*

It transpired that international students studying in this UK university employed a range of English language learning strategies in response to the perceived inadequacy of their English communication skills. The strategies varied widely from using formal language classes to exploiting a number of different opportunities to interact with native speakers. The behaviour of the participants shows that they clearly believed that interaction with native speakers would improve their language skills, even though it has already been shown how frightening this interaction could be.

Maggie had explained how she came to the UK initially as a visiting scholar and this meant that she didn't need to prove her level of English when she started her PhD. Consequently her English was at a very low level at the beginning of her studies ("When I came I hardly spoke English"). She tried a twin track approach to learning by talking informally to colleagues in her laboratory and by

using a grammar book. She found the grammar book unrewarding and after some weeks abandoned that strategy but continued to speak with colleagues to improve her English. This short extract from a longer discussion evidences Maggie's approach:

*...When I came I hardly spoke English..So I talked English every day in the lab..... I started studying grammar. And then I stopped that and tried to start again. Not working. But everyday my listening and speaking improved.*

*Every opportunity I get (try to improve English)...English Club and other language classes. It really improved my English but I'm still not happy with my English..*

A later extract from the same conversation shows that Maggie believes that language improvement is the result of language use:

*Maggie....best way to learn English is to learn it every day, to speak it every day. You need to go somewhere where English is spoken. You need to use English to improve it.*

Volunteering came through as a significant strategy adopted by students to build their English language skills. A number of students described how they exploited the opportunities presented through volunteering to increase their contact with native speakers in order to improve their English language skills. Students spoke very positively about volunteering activities that they had participated in. It appears that volunteering, as well as providing language learning opportunities, may contribute to increased self-confidence and well-being – experiences which themselves would be expected to lead students into

more successful English language learning situations. In a discussion with Cuifen, a Chinese student on a Masters programme she described how she had worked in a charity shop and the contribution that it had made to her language and her adapting to the UK in general. Cuifen had spoken positively about her experience of being in the UK and I probed about this:

*Me: You sound really positive about being in the UK.*

*Cuifen: It is what you make of it. I did some things to help myself.*

*Me: To help yourself? Like what?*

*Cuifen: I worked in a charity shop.*

*Me: Did they pay you?*

*Cuifen: No, like voluntary work. It was good. For language, for cultural understanding. A lot of old women come in. They have time. They are happy to talk a lot. I learned a lot.*

*Me: How did you get the job? Why did you do it if you weren't getting paid for it?*

*Cuifen: I went to the student union and they have a room...the Hive?*

*There is lots of information about volunteering. I spoke to them but the charity I liked there wasn't taking more people. But I thought it would be good. For my English. For learning about England. So I went to some charity shops and asked and one of them took me on. I haven't been there for a while now, but at first I went every week. I learnt a lot.*

Miriam, had a similarly positive experience from her volunteer work as a Chinese language assistant on a Chinese course for university staff and

students. Although Miriam did not volunteer expressly to seek out English language learning opportunities, she explained how the ultimate result was better English language skills. She got involved initially because she was proud of being Chinese and she found that the experience of teaching Chinese gave her self-confidence which fed positively into her English language learning:

*Miriam: When I decided to do it [become a Chinese language assistant] I thought I was proud to do it, that is why I did it, and then I got confident learning my English.*

Asma, whose positive language learning experiences had taken place before she took up her university position, explained how she had supplemented her study at her language school by helping out at primary school jumble sales.

*Asma: One of the most useful things is to speak English outside the class. I did some things when I was at the language school in Oxford. I helped my host mother with a ....sale at her children's primary school. Second hand things, clothes, toys.*

*Me: A jumble sale?*

*Asma: Yes! A jumble sale. Very good for my English. I learned all my numbers very well! The prices for things. Names of things. Everyday English.*

As I discussed English language learning strategies with these research participants, it transpired that the international students interviewed in this study used other international students, and very occasionally British students, as support for their study and for English language development.



Maggie, the Thai student who considered that she had started her studies with a particularly poor level of English, had an English friend and asked him to look at her writing and to get feedback on it. She also got a lot of support from her PhD supervisor:

*Maggie: I got an English friend who gave me feedback on writing...but I didn't want to ask him too much, to take too much of his time. Felt bad...My supervisor has been very helpful and gives me feedback on my writing and some feedback on my grammar..*

Another student also used the strategy of appealing to a home student:

*Cuifen: I had a British friend and I was really nervous about my grammar mistakes because I went into the second year and I was not sure about what result you could get for your coursework. I asked my friend just once to have a look at my essay and asked him to look and was it OK to pass, just one time and he said OK.....*

It is interesting how cautious both Cuifen and Maggie sounded as they discussed their strategy of appealing to home students. I considered that this might be because they felt that they had done something they shouldn't have done. It is notable that in this research these are the only two cases where international students appealed to home students for support. In contrast, there were a number of cases where students worked with other ESL students to improve their English language skills. The following excerpts, which were all answers to the same question, evidence this approach to language learning:

*Me: What sort of things do you do to improve your English?*

*Ting: We work together. Me and a good friend from Italy. It's a good way to study English. I think we learned well together. I think it's easier to understand people who have English as a second language. We correct each other.*

*Mahmud: Me and my friends, other students, we talk English. Even though we know other languages better. Because we want to improve our English and make good progress.*

*Frank: Of course study together. Learn together. We say 'I learned a new word' and share it with other. We are the same level so that makes it good. Not using books, but talking.*

*Maggie: Speaking with international friends. In English. We must do this! No other chance to improve our English!*

However this strategy may be hard to adopt when learners share their first language. One Arabic speaking student described how her and her fellow PhD students always intended to speak English with each other to improve their skills, but then often lapsed back into their shared first language:

*Badra: We try to speak English together, but then we go into Arabic. We say 'speak English!' but then we go into Arabic! We came here to speak English!*

This extract is discussed further when the category of *Being an outsider* is explored in the next chapter.

It appears that using resources in their L1 is a common strategy employed by international students. This suggests a tacit acknowledgement from students that they lack the requisite skills to access this information through English and

a prioritising of gaining important academic input. In early interviews students had touched on this use of reading in the L1, so I pursued the issue. Feng gave particularly interesting information in this regard.

*Me: Do you ever read books in Chinese for your knowledge and research?*

*Feng: Yes, most students have a Chinese copy, especially for their bachelor degree. Especially their final year, we can find all the books, or the main book in Chinese.*

*Me: Is it exactly the same book translated?*

*Feng: Yes, exactly the same. Most of the students read the Chinese book first and then read the English book. That's a good student! Some students just read the Chinese one. They think that's enough. Then they translate the language by themselves. Actually I read some books them both – both in English and the Chinese one.*

*Me: So you think most students have Chinese books?*

*Feng, Yes, even very good first class students do. For security.*

Cuifen, a Chinese Masters student who had previously seemed embarrassed when admitting that she had asked a British friend to check her written work appeared much less hesitant in discussing her use of L1 resources:

*Me: have you ever consulted something in Chinese...simply to understand it?*

*Cuifen: Yes, I have several times. Not too much reading. Just one or two, if I find it really hard to understand the English topic then I might find the*

*topic in Chinese to get a basic understanding of the topic. But I don't think I have used them as references, I just use them to help me understand...Just read it for background knowledge then...you can find basic similarities when you go back to the English literature so it's much easier*

This strategy of consulting L1 resources was also used by Maggie, from Thailand, the PhD student who had claimed a particularly low level of English at the start of her studies.

*Me: Do you ever read things in Thai for your research?*

*Maggie: Yes, when I don't understand. Then I can slowly get used to the technical language.*

Maggie's comment is a clear admission that she considers inadequate English language skills have caused her to seek out sources in her L1. It appears that reading in the L1 is also accompanied by note-taking in the same language. I was interested to understand the process of reading and researching in one language and ultimately producing a final piece of written work in English. It transpired, through a large number of discussions on this topic, that students used a number of different strategies, which ranged from working entirely in English at one extreme, to the other extreme which meant working entirely in their L1 until translating the finished piece of written work into English. Most students however worked in both languages at various points in the study process. As the range of study practices varied widely, I decided to probe a bit:

*Me: I'm interested in when you're studying, making notes, planning a piece of work, writing...when you're writing and when you're using Chinese. Can you tell me about that?*

*Cuifen: A combination I think. Usually for the general structure I might just use English, like which paragraph the topic is in, the order I use general English. But any specific thought, like an important point I have to add in my essay I write just Chinese because it's shorter and easier to get me to understand why I started to writing it. So it's like a combination, English and Chinese together.*

*Me: Would you read something in English and make some notes in Chinese?*

*Cuifen: Yeah sometimes. Because usually in English the sentence is too long. I can just write the general meaning in Chinese. It's much easier. But I find that if I need to use the sentence – like a paraphrase – then you have to copy the English sentence and the Chinese meaning doesn't really help. The Chinese translation just helps you – you have to remember...but the English sentence you need to keep with the Chinese so when you write in English that's much easier for to use the correct phrase.*

It seems that Cuifen's notes to herself whilst she was studying, such as personal reminders, were written in Chinese, but points that were going to appear in the final written piece of work were done in English. It transpired that this approach of making notes in L1 was a strategy used by other international students as well. I probed with another student about this:

*Me: Do you sometimes makes notes in Thai?*

*Maggie: Yes. Working in two languages. Make notes in Thai. If I go to a meeting I make notes in Thai and then prepare what I'm going to say in English. I'm still scared of writing in English. If it's an important email I ask a friend to proofread it...*

The strategies discussed up to this point reflect popular strategies used by international students that apparently they felt comfortable using. For example the strategy above of reading sources in their L1 would seem to be considered a 'legitimate strategy' that students felt were acceptable. It transpired that there was also another range of strategies employed when students lack the English language skills that are needed in their studies. Students clearly felt that some of these strategies were not approaches that would help them in the long run, rather they were survival strategies, clutched at desperately in a time of need. Some students seemed embarrassed to admit to them and some students denied using them themselves but claimed that other students used them. One of these coping strategies was students working entirely in their first language and simply translating the final product into English. Several students used the web based *google translate* facility freely available online for their translation. Maggie admitted to using this tool:

*Maggie: ...I also use google translate, but it takes a long time....*

Feng's comments show us that *google translate* is used by students who do everything in their L1 and then simply translate the finished product into English at the end of the process:

*Feng: 30 per cent of students will write in Chinese and then translate it..  
Maybe use google translate and then change some grammar mistake...  
we know that translation is not good.”*

The admission that students realise that the final translation is not a good one but that students still use it, suggests the desperation that some students experience. Alice, in her role of support tutor related how she had taken up the role of being a tutor to other international students in her department. She described how she had worked with another student who had particularly poor language skills and how this student had struggled with his studies. Alice helped him translate his work into English, despite her misgivings in this approach:

*Alice: Speaking and writing English were very hard for him. His ideas were all in Chinese and then we would translate them, it's a bad way to work, some sentences would have not meaning and it's not good for his English....*

Feng threw more light on how some weaker international students use translation when they run out of time in their studies:

*Feng: Some people work very late and they don't have time to translate. They need a faster way so mother language and translate to second language, that's the fast way...We all know google translate. But it's just a machine. We shouldn't use that. But some guys are very hurry. They have just one night. We call them 'one night boy'.*

I was surprised to hear that there was a phrase to describe a student who would produce their coursework in one night, so I probed further:

*Me: 'One night boy'? Is that a common phrase?*

*Feng: Yes, 'one night boy' or 'one day boy'. 'One month boy' would be good! But some just one night. They say this is the fast way because some guys write English very slow, like 100 words in one hour I think that's very slow, so they can't finish their work on time, this is the only way and others can't help them, even though they know the translation is rubbish they still use it...Even some Masters student do that. The first presentation in October he translated it all by google translate and then changed some errors and mistakes....I took it to Paul [the study skills advisor] and he said he couldn't understand this part, really difficult to understand - I know."*

Students also used the grammar and spelling functions in word processing packages to help them with their language. In the same way that students used *google translate* even though they knew it didn't work well, they also used the grammar and spelling underlining functions in word processing packages to help them find their writing mistakes despite their awareness of the limitations of this strategy:

*Alan: I use Office on my computer and look for the underline to see if my language is correct. If it's not underlined then I think the language is OK. But then they tell me my language is not correct...*

*Me: They?*

*Alan: Yes, teachers. I know, I know it's not a good way, but what can we do when we are not sure?*

Other students made similar comments:



*Mahmud: We use the underlining in Word. But I think it's not a good method. I don't think it can find the mistakes.*

*Frank: We use tools on the computer. It would be better to have better English. It can't tell you what you should write if you don't know the word. But some people use it a lot.*

Cuifen discussed a popular belief amongst international students that if they translated material from their L1 into English then they could submit it without being cited for plagiarism. Cuifen, who had achieved a first class undergraduate degree, and was now studying for a Masters, was apparently regarded as a successful student within her peer group and was consulted by other students in need of advice.

*Me: What do students complain about? If they are feeling unhappy about living and studying in the UK?*

*Cuifen: Why do I have to do all these references for example. References are quite tiresome, quite boring, that's quite a difficult thing to get – when to reference, how to paraphrase, seems to be a big problem...A lot of people ask, if I really do that, copy, will the lecturer find out if I copy? They translate from the Chinese into English and then no one will find out they copy because they don't need to put references, because in Chinese I translate by myself. So quite often they do that..*

*Frank: About writing in English! I asked my friend how she is getting on with her report. She said 'I have finished it all. I just have to translate it!' But I think it won't work. The structure, everything, will be strange. But I know lots of students do this! Maybe not the good ones. But the others..*

Another behaviour pattern discussed by international students was that of students withdrawing from interaction with academic staff when they felt that they could not manage with their studies. In these cases, students indicated that it was a fundamental weakness in language which was the cause of the study problem. Alice's Chinese student whom she tutored with particularly weak English skills displayed this behaviour:

*Alice: He didn't reply to his emails from his tutor and told me that he didn't reply because he didn't understand them.*

Other international students noticed that peers who struggled with their language behaved in similar ways. After Alice's comment, I probed later interviewees to seek out confirmation of this through a direct question which was answered in a variety of ways:

*Me: Have you noticed other students who really struggle with their level of English? How do they manage?*

*Mahmud: Yes, there are some who really find it difficult.. low level. My friend shared a house with one. He never went out! Hide away.*

*Frank: Some low level students miss class a lot. They should do the opposite! They should go more! They avoid the teacher. I think they are afraid, maybe not afraid, maybe embarrassed with their level.*

*Ting: There are students definitely sit at the back, and miss their tutorials because they don't want to look bad in front of other students and their teacher. So they stay away.*

### **5.3 Discussion: Struggling to communicate**

This grounded theory proposes that one of the main concerns faced by international students is in *Struggling to communicate*. The following discussion begins with an overview of this category, followed by explorations into its properties of *Being at a disadvantage*, *Feeling foolish*, *Building confidence*, *Falling back* and *Clutching at straws*.

#### **5.3.1 Struggling to communicate: overview**

International students experience great anxiety over their inability to communicate effectively with native speakers of English and this has a huge impact on their general feeling of wellbeing. The paramount importance of English language to international students is reflected strongly in a return to the literature in this field which is treated as further data in this study. Research on Chinese students in a British university (Zhou and Todman, 2009) has shown that the most frequently reported difficulties were those concerned with language. Other researchers, also using a grounded theory approach (Khawaja and Stallman, 2011), found that international students in Australia reported English language proficiency being a major area of concern. In a similar way to students in this study, their students showed that language concerns impacted on their confidence, and frustrated their attempts to answer questions in the classroom even when they know the answer. These authors also found that international students' reading ability negatively impacted their comprehension of subject matter and that having to use dictionaries slowed down the process of reading. And in the same way that this study has noted the difficulties in writing, Khawaja and Stallman (2011) noted that international students discussed the amount of extra time they spent in writing. The students in their

study also discussed the damaging effect of linguistic skills on building social links: “*I am scared that my English is not good and that makes me shy.*” (p. 15) thus leading to ESL students avoiding mixing with home students. Their students also linked English proficiency to academic success and stressed the importance of interaction through clubs and jobs as the most effective strategy to improve language skills. It seems that confidence in English plays a crucial role in students’ expectations of academic and social success. What emerges in this study is the centrality of the English language to international students’ lives: they consider it *the* essential ingredient to the success of their overseas venture.

### **5.3.2 Being disadvantaged**

The term *Being disadvantaged* emerged to describe how ESL students felt when they came to studying in English. In terms of academic consequences of studying in a second language, Phakiti *et al.* (2013) found that ‘in English medium universities, English language ability is one of the most critical aspects for both native English and non-native English speaking students’ academic success’ (p. 241). Phakiti *et al.* (2013) review a number of studies which showed that ability in English is one of the ‘most problematic aspects for international students’ (p. 242) because their language skills may not be good enough to manage with the English language requirements of their courses. Yen and Kuzma (2009) carried out research with Chinese students at a British university using quantitative methodology to verify a relationship between IELTS scores (IELTS being the most popular English language assessment used for ESL students) and academic performance by matching IELTS scores against grade point average scores of students new to the university. They found a

positive correlation between the IELTS scores that students had achieved and their subsequent marks, particularly in cases where the students' listening and writing results were low.

However, other studies have found it difficult to quantify this link between language proficiency and academic success and have produced mixed results. Cotton and Conrow (1998) found almost no overall correlation between a score achieved in IELTS and subsequent academic performance, as did Dooley (1999). Such studies may suggest more of a mismatch between skills needed to do well in IELTS and the skills needed to do well at university than the lack of correlation between English language skills in general and success in university study. Zhang and Mi (2010), who interviewed over 40 Chinese students in Australia, found that although students expressed language concerns (especially listening and speaking, and especially within the first two years of their studies) the difficulties did not seem to affect the success of students on less linguistically demanding courses. Firm conclusions on this correlation may not be surprising given the multiplicity of possible contributing factors to a students' academic success.

There are a number of studies which suggest that whilst a certain level of proficiency is required to enable students to excel, it is not a sole determinant and even though IELTS is not a predictor of academic success it is an important variable. Academics researching the effect of language proficiency (Hill *et al.*, 1999; Kerstjens and Nery, 2000; Storch and Hill, 2008; Ramachandran, 2011) cite the importance of other contributing factors involved, such as application to studies, motivation, prior knowledge of the subject being studied, personal interest, cultural background, teaching and the availability of support services at

universities. Although the previous study by Phakiti *et al.* (2013) discusses the importance of a threshold level of language, their study supported the proposition that 'English language proficiency is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success of international students' (p. 250). As competition for international students increases in the international global marketplace, the level of English which universities require from international students is likely to become under increasing downward pressure and this makes the link between language proficiency and academic success more important for stakeholders in UK higher education.

The struggle that students face in using English is reflected in surveys of academic staff working in English-speaking universities. However, it is interesting to note that whereas students prioritised language being the challenging aspect of their study, academics who teach such students mentioned a number of other issues that posed difficulties for students too. Robertson *et al.* (2000) found that academics in Australia rated international students' difficulties in the following order:

- Poor concept of multiple answers
- Poor critical thinking and analysis
- The speed of lecturing is too fast
- Written language skills
- Spoken English
- Responsibility for own learning
- A dependence on rote learning
- Grammatical English understanding
- Reluctance to participate

- Textbook language understanding
- Technical language

(Robertson, et al., 2000, p. 94)

Robertson *et al.* (2000) recorded that academics' popular responses to questions about international students' difficulties, as well as those above, included: showing a heavy reliance on books, not taking responsibility for their own work, having little appreciation of critical thinking and not understanding the concept of plagiarism.

It is certainly possible that international students overvalue the importance of English language skills and undervalue the importance of other important academic skills. It could be that students focus unduly on their language skills to explain their academic challenges because language is the most easily identifiable issue for them. When researchers in Australia looked at the correlation between skills in English for academic purposes (EAP) and academic attainment although they found a strong overall correlation, when those EAP were broken down into five smaller skills, the only skill which correlated strongly was the use of source material. The other skills, structure and development of text, control of academic style, grammatical correctness and qualities of presentation did not correlate with high attainment in writing tasks (Donohue and Erling, 2012). The researchers concluded that subject lecturers were looking *through* the language to the meaning of what was written rather than focussing on the language itself. Such research supports a suggestion that international students give undue importance to the correct use of language in their study.

This possibility is supported by data collected in this study. Every student interviewed mentioned the challenge of language, yet comments about other academic challenges were far less frequent. Feng's extensive discussion about Chinese students' disappointment with their low marks and their struggles with language show the clear belief that language is to blame: '*language is the problem*' and '*if I write in Chinese no problem*', yet it is likely that the explanation for Chinese students' disappointment in their marks is in fact far more complex. Despite his focus on the language challenge, Feng himself hints at other issues which might lie behind students' low marks:

*Feng: Chinese students, some work very hard and they can't get a high mark and they don't know why. I think maybe 80% of Chinese students say 'what do lecturers want?'*

Although Feng identifies the difficulty that students have in achieving high marks he notably fails to identify what it is that Chinese students need to do to achieve higher marks. This failure to identify what is missing from their work suggests an important gap in students' understanding of what is expected of them and this plays an important part in *The challenge* later in this chapter.

Despite the large number of research papers produced investigating international students' language level and the effect of this on their studies, much less work appears to have been done on strategies which students employ to cope if they consider their language skills to be inadequate. This brings us to a discussion of such strategies in the subproperties *Falling back* and *Clutching at straws*.



### 5.3.3 Falling back

This subproperty refers to how international students, when faced with the huge task of studying in a second language, often fall back on tried and tested study strategies that have served them well in the past. This includes the main strategy of studying in their L1. Students in this study discussed how they used a mixture of L1 and English to study at university. This was also reflected in the literature, notably Skyrme (2005), mentioned briefly in the earlier literature review and revisited in the search for supporting data. Skyrme (2005) showed that students use their L1 to fill in deficiencies in their English, for example in discussing concepts, which they would not be able to do in their L2. Skyrme's students used Chinese to remember when memorisation of material was needed, and like the students in this study, knew that the use of translation 'was a strategy that held some risk' (Skyrme, 2005, p. 8). However, there appeared to be a transition over time to studying more and more in English.

Literature suggests that we should not necessarily be unduly concerned about students' use of L1 in academic tasks. Research shows that skilled multilingual writers often refer to their L1 when writing in their L2, and that this language switching is a natural and spontaneous occurrence (Cumming, 2013) and Edwards et al (2007) discuss the pedagogical benefits of using L1 to revisit subject content during study. However, there are limits to its use when there are mismatches between conceptual categories of vocabulary and patterns of discourse between L1 and L2 (Pavlenko, 2009) so we might be concerned if we consider students L1 and L2 to be widely divergent. Furthermore, if we consider that the process of language switching during writing is a language learning process in itself, referred to as 'languaging' by Swain (2006), then although students who are constantly switching may gain from this positive process,

students relying heavily on their L1 throughout their study process may miss out.

One popular coping strategy discussed widely by interviewees in this study is that of students' reading material in their L1 for subject input. There was general agreement that this is a common occurrence, yet references to this strategy in literature on students studying at university are scarce. Campbell and Li's (2008) study of Asian students' learning experiences at university in New Zealand is representative of studies in this field. Their discussion of difficulties that international students face reflect previous studies, and they identify the reading that international students have to do during their university study as one of these difficulties:

*'Sam pointed out that many of the assigned academic readings were very difficult to read. Critically reviewing the concepts, ideas, and theories of these readings could be doubly difficult...'*  
(Campbell and Li, 2008, p. 382)

Yet, although the researchers directly asked 'Could you describe the typical methods and strategies you use in your learning?' the strategy of reading in L1 is not mentioned. Skyrme (2005) does very briefly touch on the issue in a quote from one of the students in the study:

*'I know if I read the Chinese is easy for me to understand that, and then read the English that will be easier...Maybe I found I bought the Chinese one and read together to look so I can know English and I can know Chinese. I can improve them both together.'* (Skyrme, 2005, p. 9)

In Skyrme's study the students had been exposed to a number of reading strategies by the English Language Centre and the students discuss the ways

they tackled their English language texts. However, again there is no mention of students addressing their reading needs by reading material for their university courses in their L1. Li (2013), researching the use of sources in academic writing in Hong Kong, noted that two of the research participants consulted Chinese webpages and articles for 'quick information' (Li, 2013, p. 80) but it is not clear how much this practice is used outside the study and the effect that it might have on the students' final piece of work, or the overall development of their academic English skills. In a similar study in Australia also with Chinese students, researchers (Thompson, et al., 2013) investigating the use of sources mention the use of Chinese websites by one student in passing, but move on promptly without further investigation.

Further investigations into the literature yielded many studies into international students' issues, but far fewer into the measures they took in response to them. Zhang and Mi's (2010) study is an example of probing in depth into the difficulties that students admit to whilst studying at an English-medium university, and doing so in the students' first language to achieve maximum understanding of the issues. The language challenge is thoroughly discussed, but students' responses to the challenge are not investigated. Khawaja and Stallman's (2011) qualitative study of international students' coping strategies finds a number of the positive strategies which are similar to those mentioned in the *Findings* section in this research project. As in this study, the most popular suggestion was for students to properly master English before embarking on their course of study. They found that students generally advocated seeking out and exploiting opportunities to engage with native speakers through activities such as clubs and societies and employment. Students in their study discussed

employing study skills such as planning, time management, prioritising work, advance preparation for lectures and tutorials, recording lectures, studying marking criteria, using a mentoring scheme, seeking help from senior students, and using the language support services in their university. However, interestingly, none of the more short-term desperate strategies that international students discussed in this project appeared in their study. The strategies discussed in their papers reflect positive strategies, strategies that staff would want students to employ, and strategies which would be advocated by support staff in universities, yet it is possible that they have failed to uncover some of the measures that students are reluctant to admit to taking.

The lack of research into the use of L1 resources by international students at English-medium universities is all the more intriguing given the important role that reading is considered to play in successful language learning and its role in helping students acquire the skills that they need to be successful at university. Applied linguists have long been interested in the effect that L2 reading has on second language acquisition (SLA) and there is wide agreement that it plays a significant role in furthering second language skills. In some SLA theories, reading is considered as one of the most important activities for learners to participate in because it provides 'comprehensible input' that triggers language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Krashen believes that:

*'Reading is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion however. Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers.'* (Krashen, 1993, p. 37).

Despite the different theories of SLA, in them all 'we see input as a central construct' (VanPatten and Benati, 2010, p. 37) and L2 reading at university might be considered an important part of this input. Cumming (2013) points out that the learner's interaction with form-meaning relations is considered a primary determinant of SLA in constructivist or emergent SLA theories and this process is promoted during L2 reading. Other researchers have also found extremely beneficial effects on second language skills from reading including improvements in reading comprehension itself, writing and grammatical knowledge (Elley, 1991) (Lai, 1993).

Reading at university is also considered to play an important role in acquiring the academic literacy that university students need. When lecturers set reading tasks for students they assume that 'through the course of the readings...they [students] will be picking up a vocabulary or they will be developing an enriched vocabulary for speaking about the subject' (Abasi and Graves, 2008, p. 224).

Given these benefits of L2 reading in a second language, it is likely to be a matter of concern for stakeholders if ESL students are found to be reading significant amounts in their L1. They may well be losing out on important opportunities to improve their English language skills and building the academic literacy that they need in order to fulfil their potential at university.

#### **5.3.4 Clutching at straws**

Another subproperty of *Struggling to communicate* is *Clutching at straws* which covers the desperate short term measures which some international students feel forced to take to meet the demands of studying in their L2. These measures are not easily discovered because students are not proud of using them and students who discussed them did so by referring to things that other students did. The strategies consist largely of students working in their L1 and using a

great deal of translation. ESL students knew that using tools such as *google translate* was not a reliable way to work and would not produce good results, yet many interviewees said this was common practice. It is likely that students are driven to such a measure through lack of alternative strategies: “...*they can't finish their work on time. This is the only way and others can't help them*” (Feng). Another student spoke of the strategy of copying work in the L1 and translating it into English as a way of avoiding being caught for plagiarism: ‘*Quite often they do that...*’ It is interesting that in all these cases students distanced themselves from these poor academic practices, but offered them up as things that other students did, knowing that they were not reliable ways to study.

### **5.3.5 Feeling foolish**

*Feeling foolish* is the label given to the property of *Struggling to communicate* which describes how international students feel when they struggle to communicate with native speakers, especially in everyday situations which require them to have the spoken language skills required to engage in everyday interaction. When I interviewed Zikri from Malaysia I was immediately impressed by his excellent oral English skills, and yet if we return to his earlier comments we see that he considers there is still a language barrier:

*‘There is a language barrier....We worry about how others might perceive us. Even though I understand that, I'm still scared of walking over and talking to somebody and making a fool of myself. I don't know how to communicate, after a few pleasantries, the conversation dies out to an awkward silence.’*

This input reflects the literature on communicative competence and sociolinguistic competence, in which focus is given not only to language structure, but to knowing how to communicate appropriately with people and use of appropriate communication strategies. Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence as being composed of grammatical competence (knowledge of language items, structure and phonology), sociolinguistic competence (which refers to the sociocultural rules which language users follow and rules of discourse which allow language users to decode messages for social meaning) and strategic competence (the verbal and non-verbal strategies that language users make use of to repair communication breakdowns). They proposed that this communicative competence could be observed in communicative performance.

This division of competencies can be helpful in the debate regarding international students' English language skills: an initially competent ESL student may well have the grammatical competence which is required of him or her, yet lack the more culturally bound sociolinguistic competence. The sociocultural rules of use required for sociolinguistic competence govern what language is appropriate in a particular context depending on factors such as topic of discourse, the roles of the participants and the setting. When Zikri says that '*after a few pleasantries, the conversation dies out to an awkward silence*' it is knowing what to say in that situation, his sociolinguistic competence, which is lacking. Similarly, Miriam finds her sociolinguistic competence wanting when she doesn't know how to respond to the teachers: '*I know I should respond, but I don't know how to...*' It is not her knowledge of English language vocabulary and grammatical structures which is at fault, but her knowledge of how to use the language, as well as what language to produce in that particular situation. It

has been shown that one of the important factors leading to the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence is contact with native speakers (Regan, 1998) (Marriott, 1995) yet contact with native speakers is limited for international students, as discussed throughout this project.

### **5.3.6 Building confidence**

*Building confidence* refers to how students' all round confidence grows as they improve their English language skills. It describes the phenomenon of how students employ language learning strategies which improve their English language competence and, alongside this, their self-confidence and well-being. The emergence of this property was confirmed by the literature. Sawir *et al.*'s (2012) research in this area focused on the concept of international student security. Human security in their paper is defined as 'maintenance of a stable capacity for self-determining human agency' (Marginson, *et al.*, 2010, p. 60 in Sawir, *et al.*, 2012). Their research confirmed the huge effect that a lack of language competence can have on international students' well-being. They reported significant barriers in making friends across cultures and considered these to arise from a combination of language difficulties and cultural differences. Their research showed the huge impact of language proficiency in the human security of international students both inside and outside the classroom. They recognised students as active agents and considered their security in the full range of human rights areas including, amongst others, personal safety, freedom from abuse and discrimination, personal and social networks, and authority. Interestingly, the researchers found that their interviewees considered English language proficiency to be the key to 'active agency', the enabling factor in being able to act outside the usual confined and



passive life of Asian international students – a label which was rejected by every one of the 200 international students interviewed by Sawir *et al.*. Like this study, the Sawir research confirms the importance of language proficiency for the potential of more than just superficial interactions between international and home students.

#### **5.4 Conclusion to Struggling to communicate**

The key points to feed into the recommendations section in the final chapter hinge around the lack of confidence that international students have in their English language skills and the effect that this has on their overall confidence.

Key data here is:

*Maggie: If you are not confident with your English, you are not confident with yourself.*

*Maggie: Coming to terms with English is the main thing for me.*

These comments reflect the close relationship that international students perceive between language learning and ultimate success in university study, an issue which reappears in the discussion of the core category of *Making the grade* later on. It has also been suggested here that international students possibly overestimate the effect that their language has on their academic success, and this means that they may well overlook other important factors that heavily influence their academic success.

This section has also revealed a number of strategies that students with weak language skills exploit which have not yet been investigated in depth by academic researchers, such as reading source material in L1 and using translation tools. An interesting aspect to consider in regard to these strategies

is that of English language support and English language preparation courses that international students attend before and during their university study. Recommendations in regard to the content of these courses are made at the end of this study. Recommendations are also made in regard to the findings about students' sociocultural linguistic challenges. Although the students who were interviewed simply labelled their communicative challenges as difficulties with 'English', deeper analysis showed the sociocultural linguistic challenges they face and relevant recommendations about the content of English language courses to support international students are made in the light of this.

# Chapter Six: Findings and Discussion *Being an outsider*

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## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter concentrates on international students' concern about their lack of meaningful contact with home students and the host society in general. In a similar way that all the international students who were interviewed expressed unhappiness with their level of English, they also all expressed unhappiness and frustration at their lack of friendships with British students and the way that their social networks largely consisted of co-nationals and other international students.

The detailed findings are presented below as excerpts from nearly all of the research participants who participated in the study. The findings are followed by a discussion of *Being an outsider* and its properties of *reaching out*, *Being ignored* and *Recreating home*.

## 6.2 Findings: Being an outsider

The findings show that the students in this research saw themselves as outsiders, as being estranged from the main student body and British society in general. In some cases students tried hard to break down the considerable barriers which appear to prevent integration on campus, yet their success was very limited. Other students tried far less, and relied more heavily and more quickly on co-national groupings for friendship and social networking, but even these voiced discontent with their failure to have more than shallow interactions with home students. The lack of interaction seemed to lead, as previously

noted, to a vicious circle in which international students turned to co-nationals for relationships and this monocultural community, although it was an important support mechanism for students, also acted as a barrier between home and international students.

The strategies that international students adopted to build social networks in response to *Being an outsider* were similar to, or even the same as, those that students adopted in order to improve their English language skills, which highlights the complex relationship between the categories *Struggling to communicate* and *Being an outsider*.

Like the language issue, the issue about being detached from home students and the host society arose early on in the interviews often without me introducing the topic. Zikri immediately talked about his lack of social life in response to a general question about being an international student:

*Me: What's it like being an international student in Plymouth?*

*Zikri: Well, I have no social life. Absolutely none. I rarely have any interaction with people outside some of the research classes that I attend. I just keep on reading journals. I am in my own bubble.....I have no idea how British students socialise. Do they go to the pub?*

The question suggests an interest in the way that British students socialise but a total ignorance of how this happens. This ignorance is mirrored in other students' comments. Alice, from China, who had studied in her final undergraduate year in the same university as where she studied for her PhD, showed similar ignorance when she talked about her knowledge of the city that

she lived in. She described how she spent all her time with other Chinese students.

*Me: What was it like when you first came here?*

*Alice: In my first year in Plymouth I didn't know anything. All the Chinese students are just living together. In my first year here I was the same. All Chinese students in the same group. It's just like being in China – speaking Chinese all the time, except living in Plymouth....*

Alice's comments emphasise the link between international students turning to each other for social networking and their lack of knowledge in regard to their host culture and city. Alice shows how students group together with co-nationals and that they may have a limited knowledge of their host city, environment and culture. Alice followed up her comments with further data confirming the sense of detachment that international students can experience during their study period abroad. In this extract she admits to her scant knowledge about her host city and appears to be embarrassed by her ignorance:

*Alice...My parents asked me about Plymouth, what it's like. I didn't know! I only knew the city centre. I didn't really know about Plymouth, how many people there are... Only knew about fish and chips!*

Interestingly, all of Alice's comments presented here come from my simple question: '*What was it like when you first came here?*' This question alone initiated 'the spill' (Nathaniel 2008) so sought after by grounded theory researchers, which suggests the participant believes they are being listened to and have an opportunity to give their story. At this point I took the opportunity to probe into the issue of friendships between international and home students.

The response highlighted the large cultural gap between the two groups of students and the difficulty in finding common ground:

*Me: Did you try to meet other people? Outside the Chinese group?*

*Alice: I tried to. It's really hard, really difficult. Being in pubs is too noisy, don't like it really. I want to drink tea. I don't like drinking alcohol. I tried to break into some local groups.*

*Me: Did you manage to?*

*Alice: No. We don't know what they like. They are talking about football, local movies. We just watch Chinese movies. We don't have topics to talk about. So sort of pushed back into the Chinese group.*

Alice's 'pushed back into the Chinese group' comment shows a sharp understanding of how failure to break into the host resulted in students falling back to their own national groupings. Also interesting is Alice's use of 'we' to describe her personal experience which indicates a collective shared Chinese experience. Alice mentioned the issue of alcohol, and this was brought up by another Chinese student Feng. During our interview he described tentative and limited relationships that he had made with British people:

*Me: Do you have British friends?*

*Feng: Yes, I have, but not too much. And I am quiet. I don't like party or pub, not too much.*

Feng initially sounds positive about his relationships with British students but later on in the interview we get:

*Feng: Very very few Chinese students communicate with students from other countries.*

Feng's comments suggest that the difficulty may lie with the Chinese students. However, in Cuifen's interview when we discussed the difficulty of making friendships with British students, she was more prepared to suggest that it was not necessarily an issue with the Chinese students, but more of one that British people can be difficult to get along with.

*Me: What about friendships and relationships with British students. Do you have some British friends?*

*Cuifen: I have a couple of British friends. It's quite good but still find it hard to get on well, especially British people and lots of people around me say they cannot really get on well with British people....*

Cuifen appeared to be considerably more active in her attempts to form relationships with British students than many other international students. She employed the positive strategy of volunteering to be a Mandarin teacher in order to interact with home students. Her experience was a positive one:

*Cuifen: But I got three or four [friends] because I know them because I taught them Mandarin before so it's quite good and because at first I had to charge them for the teaching...but in the end I didn't because they had become friends, and it's really hard for me to charge them! Don't want to, but it was good. Every time we had a lesson, like one time a week, we talked about a lot of things, just chat....so that really helped a lot building our friendship. I think I took them for one year or something and after a*

*year they didn't want to learn any more but we still keep in touch and chat sometimes so that's really good.*

The strategy worked for Cuifen in that she gained interaction with British students, which had been her aim. The '*we still keep in touch and chat some times*' comment shows a relationship still exists after the structure of the classes has finished, although it appears it is limited. The above extract shows Cuifen's positive feelings in regard to the experience she had with home students through her Mandarin teaching project, yet later on in the interview when we returned to the issue she displayed more mixed feelings with relationships with British people. This was when I asked about when she had started at university in the UK:

*Me: When you came into the university did you find British people quite welcoming to you? Did you find it easy or hard to..*

*Cuifen: Hard at first, I must say. Especially, at first you are scared to speak and in the lectures apart from my two Chinese friends, in the lecture - all British people - and they are not really, at first we think of them as friendly like they want to make friends with you but no, they just want to get on with their own things. They don't care about making friends with you, they are not interested in your culture and stuff. That's one complaint I hear a lot from new incoming students – it's really hard to get on with British students.*

Here Cuifen shows her perception that British students are not interested in international students, that their background, their culture, holds little interest or value for them. Cuifen described how she gradually got used to the way that



she would attend lectures regularly alongside students without interacting with them:

*Cuifen: ...you go to lectures every day and have lectures with them, and you don't speak at all, that's a little bit weird and at first it's a little bit sad, but after a period of time I get used to it and it's just you have your life and I have mine.....If someone is friendly, that's nice, you see each other they say hello to you, that's good, but some people look like they don't know you at all...*

In a discussion with Adam from Malaysia, it was made clear that he considered the presence of co-nationals to be important, and he was initially worried when he found out that there were merely a handful of his compatriots in the university:

*Adam: I was worried about how many students there are from Malaysia at Plymouth University. I asked my government: less than 5! That worried me. I am adapting to it.*

Adam's response to this situation was, like Cuifen who taught Mandarin, to identify activities through which he could meet local people to employ strategies to meet people:

*Adam: I'm joining the volleyball group today to meet people so I hope that will be good, some UK people through the volleyball...I am hoping to meet...*

Adam's comments show that he is consciously employing strategies to meet local people. Data from Bolin, a Chinese PhD student, indicated that Adam was not the only international student to make use of the strategy of exploiting sports

to make friends. Bolin discussed this strategy and thought it was an effective way to build social networks. He also went on to make some comments about undergraduate Chinese students, suggesting that they were not very active or interested in making friends in this way:

*Me: What advice would you give to someone coming from China to study in the UK?*

*Bolin: First thing is to actively communicate with people from different countries.....Take part in sports because it's a good way to make friends. I met a lot of undergraduate students. I seldom see Chinese students there. Most of them stay at home. In China young students stay in the dorm all day and they keep their habits here...*

Alice, who struggled so much to meet British people, also mentioned the Chinese Entrepreneur Association as a way for Chinese students to meet local people.

*Alice: There's a new group – the Chinese Entrepreneurs Association ...it's another volunteer programme for Chinese to join to get into the local community...I'm not sure how many people have real local friends.*

The *'I'm not sure how many people have real local friends'* could well be interpreted as an understatement, and the need for another volunteer programme to help Chinese students meet people from the local community serves to underline the detachment that students from that community experience. Gary was another international student who had a clear understanding of the importance of networking for international students and who was proactive in his approach to dealing with the detachment being

discussed. When I asked him what advice he would give to a new student he took the opportunity to discuss the importance of networking:

*Me: What advice would you give to someone you met in your home country who was coming to study here?*

*Gary: I would say establish a support network quickly. I could write a whole book about advice but it wouldn't be that helpful... You need a support network of people who can help you... Next year I'm going to be the President of Chinese Enterprise Society... it's because I think it's so important to do things to create a support network for international students. It's a social place with a business aspect to it too."*

It is not only Chinese students who experience detachment from the home student body and British society. Asma from the Middle East found that being a university PhD student was a more isolating experience than studying English as a full time English language student in a language school. In our interview she compared the two experiences and found that in the language school she had far more contact with native speakers of English than she had as a PhD student.

*Me: Do you have much contact with British people?*

*Asma: Not really. At the language school in Oxford it was more mixed. I made a friend through volunteering and I am still in touch with her. But here, well, it is a bit isolated. There's not enough contact with British people in general.*

*Me: Would you like more contact with home students?*

*Asma: Yes, of course! We are in the UK! Maybe Bachelor students have more contact. Sometimes when I go to a research session there is some contact. But usually just Arab women friends.*

Students know what they are missing and would advise new students to meet local people, even though they might not have managed to do that themselves:

*Me: What advice would you give to someone coming to the UK from your country?*

*Asma: I would say to live with local people more, to have a new experience and experience a new culture. Arab culture is very different from here and we – I – would like to experience more UK culture.*

*Me: Who do you spend time with?*

*Asma: Well, the PhD students in my office. The Arab women.*

Volunteering emerged as a popular strategy amongst students to build networks with the host society and this approach met with varied levels of success.

Cuifen referred more than once to the voluntary organisation she worked with for more than two years, and mentioned it when discussing ways of meeting British people and then again for ways of improving her language skills, as discussed in the previous chapter. Asma attempted to make use of this strategy although she was less successful with it:

*Asma: In Saudi Arabia I was a volunteer, I was chair of a charity. I came here and I went to the students union to their activities, but it just didn't happen. I do go on day trips with the Graduate School.*

One strategy used by a Chinese student to network was to go to church to meet people:

*Alan: I want to make more British friends. There is a lack of opportunity. It is better this year. Last year I didn't know any British people. This year I go to church on Sunday. They will listen to me there – it is good.*

These strategies show students actively looking for opportunities to interact with British people outside the university, which might suggest a lack of opportunities within the university and a lack of interest from students. Alan's 'they will listen to me there' is clearly made as a contrast to other places where he is not listened to. Alice showed her perception that her culture was not valued highly in the university when she described her disappointment with the Chinese New Year celebrations put on by the university. Although the university spent a large amount of money on Chinese New Year celebrations the effect of this celebration was to underline its ignorance of the real culture of China so the celebration was counter-productive:

*Alice: The university spends £20,000 on Chinese New Year. To show that it values Chinese students but there is no real feeling behind that. The food is really important! Not just dumplings. Lots of chicken balls. Chicken balls isn't Chinese. Spending money but not spending it carefully. It's just a dinner. Not really meaningful..*

This was not the only case in which the data suggested that international students perceive the university to have a lack of cultural awareness. Asma appeared to speak for a number of students from the Middle East when I asked her about how much she felt a full part of the university:

*Me: Do you feel a proper part of the university?*

*Asma: I love the university. But I hate it when they don't provide us with the things we need. Bit of discrimination sometimes. We were disappointed last week with some signs in the toilets and bathrooms last week [here the student showed a photograph on her mobile phone of notices which had been put up on toilet walls about keeping the rooms clean] these make us uncomfortable. We keep the facilities clean but we use them for washing, not clear what the point is. We don't make a mess. We try to keep everything clean and hygienic. My friend asked the school to remove the signs but we got no response. I think the language school was maybe more understanding of different cultures and religions.*

Outspoken criticism of the university, as seen above, was unusual in the data; most comments leading to the identification of the category 'Being an outsider' were not directed at specific targets, but usually arose from a general feeling international students experienced of being ignored. However, occasionally direct feelings of discrimination did surface, as in the above extract, and when Zikri discussed how he felt about having to record attendance at the university to meet the requirements of his visa. His data comes from a prompt about support for international students:

*Me: Do you feel international students get enough support?*

*Zikri: Hmmm. Well, at the risk of getting very political, UKBA and the Home Office are pushing us aside. Having to do the monthly swipe card in ISAS (International Student Advisory Service). It's like people who leave prison and are on parole. It's discrimination of various levels.*

*That's how parole works – ex-convicts have to go and check with their parole officer every month.*

Zikri clearly felt uncomfortable about this process, which it could be argued serves to reinforce the 'outsider' feeling. There was however almost no mention of experiences of open racism by the interviewees in their daily lives in the UK.

*Me: What do people complain about when they are feeling negative?*

*Alan: [low marks]..and some people say British are unfriendly. My friend says that a car drove past and someone threw a bottle at him. But I think that's unusual. I think most people are friendly.*

This exchange raises the issue of open hostility towards international students on the street but down plays its significance and it is the only time that open racism was referred to in the interviews in this study. In fact, Asma, who had been in the city for three years, thought that it was easier now for women like her wearing headscarves around the city because people had got used to seeing people like her around. In response to a general opening gambit from me, she introduced the topic of being from a visibly different race and culture herself:

*Me: So why did you come to study here?*

*Asma: God guided me here. I had a friend... It was difficult at first. When I came here I think people found it hard to accept people from the Middle East and Islamic people. Now there are more Arab women here, and people are forced to deal with us! It's changed since I came here three years. When I came here there were maybe three four ladies with*

*covered heads. I think people thought it looked strange, but it has got easier and now things go smoothly.*

Although her comments are positive, they still support the emergence of the 'Being an Outsider' category.

### **6.3 Discussion: Being an outsider**

This theory proposes that one of the main concerns faced by international students is in their perceptions of *Being an outsider*. The following discussion returns to the literature and weaves it into data from this study to explore this category and its properties of *Reaching out*, *Being ignored* and *Recreating home*.

#### **6.3.1 Being an Outsider: Overview**

International students at this British university appear to have similar experiences to international students in other English-speaking universities in that they find it difficult to be part of the host society which surrounds them. Although there is agreement concerning the lack of integration between international and home students, there is not agreement on why. Data from this study support a variety of arguments: that home students are not interested in interacting with international students ('*they just want to get on with their own things*') that there is no time ('*A lot of work. Time is very....I get up, rush to the lab, then when I look up it's dark*') and that international students choose to spend time with co-nationals ('*All Chinese students are just living together*'). Whilst most researchers focus on collecting data from international students, Trice (2007) investigated teaching staff's perspectives on international students' isolation from host national students, exploiting their overview of observing



home and international students studying on their programmes. Trice found that in the USA in a top research university, most teaching staff considered their postgraduate international and home students were poorly integrated and cited four main reasons for this: firstly they showed their belief that international students themselves prefer to be friends with co-nationals; secondly they thought that weak English language skills and the use of a different first language by co-nationals contributed to the isolation, thirdly the staff said that international students lacked the time to spend pursuing friendships with home students as they faced significant restraints on their time and studied under pressure; and lastly staff voiced their belief that host national students preferred interaction with other home students over spending time with international students. I have found evidence that supports all these explanations of home and international students' poor integration, yet it does not explain the difficulty to integrate when these factors are taken out of the equation: international students with good English language skills with the desire and time to integrate still find it difficult to integrate with home students and the host society in general.

Sawir *et al.* (2008) interviewed 200 international students in Australia to find that two thirds of the group experienced some degree of loneliness or isolation.

They confirmed the previous types of isolation identified by earlier studies – due to leaving family and friends and social networks at home when they travel abroad – but they also identified another type of loneliness – that of *cultural loneliness* caused by a different culture and a different linguistic environment. Students in this study similarly discussed the emotional difficulties of missing family and friends from home (an issue which appears later in *The challenge*)

and the detachment from the host society identified in this data could be considered as broadly similar to Sawir *et al.*'s cultural loneliness.

The social detachment from host society that international students experience may not only impact upon their social lives: this detachment is likely also to impact upon their academic lives. In the previous section the effect of reading on academic literacy was discussed, and concern about international students reading in their L1 was raised. Further literature consultation shows that students' social detachment could also be a factor impeding their acquisition of literacy skills. Braine (2002) claims the essential academic literacy that students need to masters is more than being able to read and write effectively:

*...students not only need to build interactive relationships with their teachers, thesis supervisors and peers, and develop effective research strategies and good writing skills, they also need to adapt smoothly to the linguistic and social milieu of their host environment and to the culture of their academic departments and institutions (p.60).*

This point of view is supported by Dong (1996) whose investigation focused on Chinese graduate students' acquisition of academic literacy skills in English. Dong found that the important factor in the acquisition of these skills was being in close contact with the community that used the academic discourse required by the students. Dong did not find a language issue in students' learning of academic literacy, but a social one. The lack of membership of the discourse community and lack of social contact with it was the main barrier to students acquiring the skills they needed. Braine's (2002) and Dong's (1996) findings suggest that international students' detachment from the host society may have more far reaching repercussions than the students themselves are aware of.

### **6.3.2 Reaching out**

*Reaching out* is the label given to the property of *Being an outsider* which describes how international students reach out towards the host society in their attempts to build relationships with its members. *Reaching out* serves to highlight the fact that, generally speaking, it is international students who make the effort to meet L1 English speaking home students and the host society rather than the other way round. Many international students *Reach out* to the host society through extra-curricular activities: they attempt to build social networks with members of the host society by joining sports clubs and taking up voluntary work opportunities. These strategies appear to meet with mixed levels of success. The notable point is that, according to the data, the international students perceive that it is they who do the *Reaching out*, who make the effort, and not the host society.

### **6.3.3 Being ignored**

*Being ignored* is a further property of the larger category *Being an Outsider* and relates to the feelings that many international students experience during their studies in the UK. *Being ignored* describes the lack of interest that home students and the host society show in international students and their cultures and it is argued here that this has a serious impact on the international student experience. The key data which leads to the emergence of this property are the interview comments in the previous findings section in which we see students' perceptions that the host society pays them no attention, seems singularly uninterested in them. Cuifen's blunt '*they don't care about making friends with you, they are not interested in your culture and stuff*' suggest that international students are not valued, their interaction is not sought. It could be argued that

home students have nothing to gain from interacting with international students, because they lack the important *social capital* that fosters relationships. The 'durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 119) referred to briefly in the literature review has been lost by international students as they move abroad to take up their studies, the result being that as individuals in their new environment they lack the resources which make them valuable contacts.

Bourdieu's theory (1991) considers not only social capital, but cultural capital whose symbolic power resides in (amongst other things) linguistic resources. This analogy can further help explain the lack of interest and value shown to international students. Certainly we have seen how international students perceive themselves to lack the language skills for work and socialising. In other words, they lack the cultural capital which is important in successfully exploiting the educational and social opportunities available to them. More research into how home students perceive international students, their level of integration with each other and home students' perception of the factors in that integration would be useful as relatively little research has been done on this topic.

The importance of the role that culture plays in international students' sense of wellbeing, as discussed in Sawir *et al.*'s (2008) 'cultural loneliness', can be considered alongside Bourdieu's cultural and social capital theory to explain international students emotional and practical struggles in coming to terms with their new environment. Their difficulty is to build social networks in a new environment in which their cultural assets have either been lost – as in the case of their valuable social contacts which have been left behind in their home

country – or suddenly devalued – as in the case of their first language skills which are redundant in their new situation. It was previously mentioned that international students considered their language skills solely from a deficit viewpoint; that their English language skills were poor and they failed to discuss any benefits of being bilingual or being proficient in more than one language. This ‘deficit model’ of their language situation reflects the perceptions they have of their UK university environment: that their first language skills are not valued. *Being ignored* can be considered the result of international students’ lack of cultural assets, a deficiency which makes international students less useful, interesting and rewarding to home students and host society members. In Sawir *et al.*’s study (2008) the interesting finding was that same-culture networks, although very important in terms of providing support for the international students, were not sufficient, and that students still reported feeling lonely even if they were not actually alone. It is argued here that the *Being ignored* property is supported by the ‘cultural loneliness’ argument: that ‘cultural loneliness’ is akin to *Being ignored* because of one’s cultural ‘deficiencies’.

Similarly, a recent report on the views of home students on international students supports the prevalence of the ‘deficit view’ of international students and the emergence of *Being ignored* (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2015). Although the report concludes that British institutions are tolerant and welcoming to students of different backgrounds, the fact remains that whereas 47% of non-EU students who were surveyed strongly agreed that studying alongside international students helped them develop a global network, only 12% of home students strongly agreed with the same proposition: ‘this may signal a reluctance among some home students to mingle with their international counterparts’ (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2015, p. 4).

### 6.3.4 Recreating home

*Recreating home* describes and explains the way in which international students turn to their co-nationals for their social networking requirements. Faced with a myriad of challenges in a new educational institution in a new country, they cope by recreating their home environment, an environment in which they can make use of their cultural and social capital. Recreating home is a phenomenon discussed by both international students and members of the host society, but whereas this research has indicated a keen desire amongst international students to interact with L1 English speaking students, literature suggests that this perception is not shared by L1 English students themselves.

Some researchers (Trice, 2007; Gu and Maley, 2008) quote university staff members in English-speaking universities who clearly believed that international students' desire to integrate with home students was very limited and they showed their perception that these students preferred the company of their co-nationals. Yet data collected here suggests that the turn towards co-nationals is a response to *Being ignored after Reaching out*. This view is supported by Sawir *et al.*'s (2008) conclusion that if home and international students are to bond more then 'local students will need to become more open to and curious about the lives and values of international students' (p173). It is argued here that international students perceive that home students are, generally speaking, not open or curious about their lives and values. Thus they feel the need to recreate home by forming mostly nationality-based friendship groups.

One particularly interesting issue in the apparent poor level of integration between international and home students is the difference between what international students say they want to do (i.e. have closer relationships with

home students and the host society) and how they actually behave in practice (i.e. spending their time with co-nationals). As noted in the literature review, much is made of the exciting potentialities of the multicultural campus whereas in practice the reality is a predominance of monocultural/national groupings (de Vita, 2005). Wright and Schartner (2013) explored international students' interaction with home students and their results mirrored the paradox found in this study: that students network in their groups despite saying that they want more contact with home students. Their students were open about how they felt comfortable with their co-nationals. So we have this from Chinese students:

*'we share the same culture, maybe we have the same habits, so it's very convenient and very comfortable to live together'* and *'for the purpose of developing English I want to live with British people, or foreigners, but about lifestyle I prefer Chinese people'* (ibid p120).

Their interviewees also admitted feeling 'lazy' about building home student friendships despite an initial expectation and desire to do so. The use of the word 'lazy' in regard to making friends with home students hints at the hard work that international students understand is involved in this undertaking. This study has already discussed how international students struggle with *Feeling foolish* when they attempt to communicate with native speakers, and when they are also *Being ignored* the challenge to break out of the comfortable monocultural group is daunting indeed.

There is a further concept that can help us understand the difficulty that international students face in addressing native speakers which Norton refers to as the right to speak and the right to impose reception (Norton, 2000). Closely related to Bourdieu's work on capital, Norton's research recognised the importance of power relations at play between interlocutors. Native speakers can be considered to be in a position of power as they control access to their

language based social group, only granting access to those who possess the right level of language skills. Second language users with poorer levels of language skills are thus denied access to the language learning opportunities they so desperately need. Norton noticed that the native speakers often 'judged' the use of language by non-native speakers and made disparaging comments about how it was difficult to communicate with them and effectively silenced them by not recognizing their right to take part and be listened to. Norton binds this concept closely to that of identity change in language learning, an issue that is discussed in depth in the latter stages of this study.

The *Feeling foolish* (identified as a subproperty of *Struggling to communicate*) experience of international students can be considered as another important factor in their need to recreate home. As students turn towards their compatriots they are perceived as over dependent on each other, a phenomenon which further distances the group from the host society. Brown (2009) found that in her interviewees with postgraduate students on a British campus, South-East Asian students were considered to be particularly co-nationally cohesive and that this intimacy produced a perception of 'impenetrability and dependence' (ibid p190) which caused 'withdrawal in the face of inaccessibility'.

Another aspect to include in consideration of the international student recreation of home is the way that members of collectivist cultures may rely more on group membership than individualist cultures, and international students involved in this study came from predominantly collectivist cultures as defined by Hofstede (Hofstede, 1991). Certainly there is data which has been collected here which reinforces the importance of family to Middle Eastern students. From Asma we hear:



*Several times a day [communicate with family] , with technology, on the phone. Every few minutes with my mum or my aunty. That is the Saudi way. Family is very important. People from other countries, they say why are you always talking to your family. If we weren't always talking that would be a problem for us.*

Asma goes on a number of times to describe her social network which consists entirely of 'Arab women friends' although, like other students, she professes the desire to meet more British people. Other researchers have picked up on how students from collectivist cultures may feel pressurised to remain part of their national grouping whilst sojourning at universities abroad. Brown (2009) quoted postgraduate students from the Far East:

*"..he said that the rest of his Chinese classmates don't like him, because he doesn't hang around with them."*

And

*"If I broke with them much, they would not like it. In this society, it isn't good to make yourself separate. They might look at you strange or something like that.."*

And finally,

*"..They always stick together. Sometimes they make joke "ah you never want to come with us'.*

This data indicates pressure from within the international student culture to retain its distinctiveness, although I found no similar theme emerging in my study.

#### **6.4 Conclusion to Being an outsider**

It is clear that international students suffer disappointment, stress and negativity because of the difficulty that they had in building friendships with members from the home student body and the host society. The telling point is that this difficulty in building such friendships is not a short term problem which is soon overcome as the students find their feet, but it is an ongoing issue for international students who have been studying in this country or even the same university in some cases for years. In this study it was found that when interaction between international students and native speakers occurred (usually as a result of international students *Reaching out* to native speakers) the interaction was limited and it did not lead on to further integration.

Other researchers have reached similar findings. Rientes and Nolan (2014) carried out a longitudinal study of international students' social and friendship networks and their working and learning relationships. They found that, as they expected, there was little cross-cultural interaction between international students and home students, and, as they did not expect, that the cross-cultural interaction which there was did not increase over a period of time. They concluded that some interaction between international and home students does not automatically mean an ongoing process of integration will take place. They clearly found that students' (international and home students') networks of friendships and study partners were built on the same cultural background and that the degree of segregation actually increased over time. Rientes and Nolan

(2014) also reached similar findings as this study in regard to the role that co-national groups played in providing a valuable source of support, reducing uncertainty and creating a sense of belonging, and helping to counteract culture shock. However, they consider that, over a period of time, co-national friendships can hinder intercultural interactions between international and home students: 'it can be expected that they are not receiving valuable information that could increase their general, work and interaction adjustment in the host education setting' (p178). They found that students from smaller co-national groupings were more integrated with home students, possibly as a result of being forced to be more integrative because of their inability to set up their own co-national networks. Most interesting of all, was their conclusion that intervention from the institution could significantly increase the amount of cross-cultural friendships that grew up by requiring culturally mixed groups of students to complete study tasks together. Left to their own devices, students would self-select into monocultural study groups and little cross-cultural interaction would take place.

The recommendations section offers English-speaking universities a number of suggestions for action in regard to tackling the issue of international students' experiences of *Being an outsider*.

# Chapter Seven: Findings and Discussion *The Challenge*

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## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the overwhelming experience of *The challenge* faced by international students during their academic sojourns in the UK. Some of the difficulties faced by these students have already been discussed in depth, notably those of *Struggling to communicate* and *Being an outsider*, and they are considered big enough difficulties to qualify as categories in their own right. However, alongside these discrete difficulties, *The challenge* itself emerged from the data to describe the feeling that international students experience as they slowly become aware of the size of the task that they face in living and studying in a new environment.

These interviewees felt considerably out of their depth living and studying in university in the UK and they discussed challenges in all areas of daily life and academia. Extracts of interviews are presented here, with comments relating to *Struggling to communicate* and *Being an outsider* already having been presented in earlier chapters. The findings section is followed by a discussion of *The challenge* and its subproperties *Bridging the gap*, *Catching up* and *Daunted*.

## 7.2 Findings: The challenge

It appears that the students in the study were poorly prepared for their overseas study experience and were surprised at how difficult living and studying in the UK turned out to be. Students seemed to find themselves in an environment

where the skills that they had built up over their lifetime were often redundant and they had to gain new skills to survive in their new educational and social culture where new and different things were expected of them. *The challenge* represents the huge task that international students face in adapting to living and studying in the UK, and succeeding academically in their new environment.

Cuifen spoke for many of the students when she discussed the challenges that she came across in her studies. Apart from the language issue, she found wide differences between what was expected of her in the UK and in China. She experienced many new academic demands being made of her, including in the areas of referencing, originality and critical thinking. This extract shows Cuifen first describing the relative ease of study in China and comparing it with the difficulty of coursework in the UK.

*Cuifen: ....In China we didn't do coursework like here. Here it counts to your final result but in China, no. The most important thing in China in the university is exams. You just have to pass your exams every year...So Chinese students may find it a little bit shocked because [here] the teacher really didn't care about their attendance.*

*Me: And what are the exams like?*

*Cuifen: ..Usually it's quite easy and for some subjects you just have to remember the things in the book, and you can pass it quite easily and get a high score. In China we don't have Harvard referencing and such stuff so it's quite easy and lots of students just go to the internet, google it, download, copy, paste.....Usually the teacher gives you a clue about the exam question so you can prepare it in advance – you can search for the*

*question on the internet, just remember it and when it comes to the exam you can write it down. So that's quite easy actually.*

Cuifen is open about the things that Chinese students are not comfortable with in regard to their study in the UK.

*Me: What do students complain about?*

*Cuifen: They say why do I have to come to England to get a degree? I could just stay at home comfortably and go to university in China. Or my parents could find a job for me. Why do I have to come here? I want to go back go home. I don't want to stay here anymore. Why do I have to spend so much time doing coursework? Really, lots of students complain about the coursework. Every time an assignment comes people get so struggling and a really big headache especially when it comes to the deadline. We know we should be original. Try to show critical thinking. Include references. All that is really hard!*

*Me: So it's harder here?*

*Cuifen: Yeah, definitely it's harder studying here.. And including the language stuff. It's definitely harder here!*

Cuifen clearly demonstrates that students with her background have to rapidly adapt to a new educational culture. This view was supported by Alan, another Chinese Masters student who also raised the differences between studying in China and studying in a university in the UK:

*Alan: In China people don't worry about plagiarism. There's no Turnitin or anything like that. You can just download something and paste it in.*

The lack of a need for student originality in university work was also mentioned by Maggie, a Thai PhD student, who was prompted in our interview to discuss differences in education between her country and the UK:

*Me: ...What about other differences? In educational culture?*

*Maggie: Well yes, it is different. In Thailand the students will wait for the teacher to give the information. The students just repeat it. Here it is two-way. The teacher gives the ideas and the students have to find out why what they need to know...Students need to learn how to study on their own. Very different study culture.*

Gary, studying for a PhD and from Malaysia, described how in his home country lecturers and supervisors were considered to be the experts who could hand down knowledge to their students, whereas in the UK these academics were considered to offer guidance to students who were learning independently.

*Me: Is education very different here to your own country?*

*Gary: Yes! In Asia your academic supervisor has the knowledge, but here your supervisor is the guide. Here you see students and supervisors discussing but Asian students tend not to argue or debate so much. They tend to accept it. And they don't criticise too much, openly anyway. When I first came into the second year of my undergraduate degree, my first year here, I have to say it was a miserable academic year. The teaching style is different, the method of studying is different, lecturers' expectations are different. As well as that there is adjusting to life. In Asia, you can spend time studying all day and then go out and get*

*something to eat, it's almost nothing [the cost]. But here, you work and then you go out and get a take away and you pay £10-15. That's a lot!*

In the above extract Gary bundles together the different issues he faced (such as studying, eating, finance) into one overall challenging experience which made his life 'miserable'. A large part of Gary's challenge was being 'thrown into the deep end' of the new educational culture:

*Gary: ...In the UK you are given the basics and then you can go away and critically review and come back with recommendations. So you are expected to go away and analyse stuff. In Asia there is more direction 'this is what I want you to do'. In Asia if you don't understand you can learn it and do it and meet expectations. Here you are thrown in the deep end.*

Zikri, another Malaysian PhD student, admitted to finding the new educational culture in the UK very different to what he was used to. He discussed how in the UK a student is expected to develop one's own academic 'voice' and how this was a new aspect of study for him.

*Me: Have you noticed a difference in educational culture between Malaysia and the UK?*

*Zikri: Yes! In writing. In the UK you have a voice as the researcher, so it is more personal. You can give a presentation and put your own input into it, not like in Malaysia where you have no voice. Here it's not just a corporate report. Your personal experience here is valued as a researcher. We have to learn how to do this and it's not easy at all!*



Zikri here shows a keen awareness that he needs to adapt to a new study culture but it is not at all clear how he will adapt, or how much guidance and support he is given to make that adaptation. Yet despite the challenge of studying in a new environment, a common theme emerging from the interviews with international students was that being successful in those studies and achieving high marks was extremely important indeed for them. Feng seemed to think that achieving high marks was more of an issue for international students than for home students and he compared the different aims that international students and home students appeared to have in regard to their university study. His comments clearly demonstrate the importance of scoring highly for him and his peers, and he discussed how he and his friends collaborated in attempts to score those marks:

*Feng: We talk and say how to solve that problem...[marks]*

*Me: So good marks are important?*

*Feng: High marks are very important! First we need to graduate with a higher mark, especially with the Bachelor. We need to get an upper second, that's good, and first is best, prefer that but we can't do that....Because for Chinese students marks are very important, not the knowledge or what we learn – that is also important – but not as important as the score.*

Later on in the interview Feng returns to this theme of marks and this return underlines its importance for his peer group further.

*Me: What sort of things do students complain about?*

*Feng: Most of the time they complain about the marks...they are not good enough....most important thing is to get a good mark. They are thinking different from British local people – they want knowledge and marks are not so important. It's different.*

Feng shows his perception that international students are under greater pressure than home students to get high marks, and this pressure is another aspect of *The challenge* that international students face. Feng explained how for his group marks were critical to the next step in their lives:

*Feng: The Chinese students want a higher mark because when they graduate they need to apply for a masters or a company who will read their CV – their resume – the mark you get in the university, or Masters, which university you are in. So mark is more important. In some places parents maybe just parents, friends, will invent them. So ability and knowledge is not as important as success.*

Throughout the interviews there is a common thread of disappointment with low marks that students keep getting and are not sure why:

*Me: What do students complain about, when they are feeling negative?*

*Alan: Low marks! Students are often disappointed with their marks.*

As previously mentioned in the *Struggling to communicate* section, many international students failed to understand what lecturers were looking for in their work, and were disappointed after working hard and being awarded poor marks. This excerpt from Feng builds on one presented earlier in the discussion of *Struggling to communicate* and serves to emphasise the interrelated nature

of the academic challenges that international students face in regard to language and study culture:

*Feng: Chinese students, some work very hard and they can't get a high mark and they don't know why. I think maybe 80% of Chinese students say "what do lecturers want?" They don't know. They want to catch the point, even me. They don't know what to do to get the high marks and that's difficult because some guys they tell me they worked very hard on group work and then the lecturer gave them about 30%. And they were confused with that. Last year I heard guys in International Trade and Risk Management they said they worked really hard and just got 40%.*

Miriam, another Chinese Masters student, discussed the educational challenge of studying in the UK and she described the difference as being told what to do in China compared with the need to study independently in the UK.

*Miriam: The lecture format is totally different. In China you get taught knowledge. You just do what the teachers tell us what to do. No thinking. Here we have to think more by ourselves. We have to prepare our lives ourselves.*

It is interesting to note Miriam's use of the word 'lives' in her 'we have to prepare our lives ourselves' which suggests that it is not only in the study field that students have to work independently, but in other areas too, and this is picked up again later in her interview when she discusses how much easier life had been in her home country

*Miriam: In Beijing University I left my parents and lived in university accommodation but it is quite easy.. There is a student cafeteria to eat in all the time, but here no....*

Miriam went on to discuss how, compared to China, accessing teacher support in the UK was harder to arrange because Chinese teachers were readily available in their offices:

*Miriam: Tutorials are very different here. Sometimes you send an email and get no response.. But in China you can just go to the tutor's office and he will see you, there is no need to send an email before to make an arrangement, you can just go. Harder here. Needs organisation!*

Asma from Saudi Arabia struggled with coming to terms with how to do her PhD research. She felt that because she hadn't done a masters in the UK, she had missed out on input on research methodology other students would have received and so she was having to catch up:

*Me: Is it very different from studying in your country?*

*Omiama: Yes, very different, especially for those who haven't studied in UK before. I did my Masters in Saudi Arabia and started my PhD here and it's very hard. In my country we didn't look at any research models. I need more sessions...*

Asma also considered that she was not getting the support that she should get because she only received support from one supervisor despite requests for the one who had left to be replaced.

*Asma: Sometimes not enough advice. But he [the supervisor] is available for me. But sometimes I feel like I'm doing research alone here. I only*

*have one supervisor. My other one left the university, for another job and moved away, and I asked more than once for another supervisor but nothing happened, so I only have one.*

One much discussed aspect of *The challenge* was how much work international students put into their studies. Most of the students interviewed mentioned the number of hours they spent on their work, which given the difficulties they have described and the importance they give to their work is not surprising.

*Asma: I work here all day and come in at the weekend too. Most of the time I am working, studying until 9 or 10. Just maybe three times a week I go out into the city centre with a friend.*

*Me: What's it like being an international student here?*

*Bolin: A lot of work. Time is very ..... time passes very quickly. I get up, rush to the lab, when I look up it's dark. Time passes very quickly!*

*Mahmud: Just work! So much to do. To learn. To read. To write. To check English! Not enough time!*

Ahmed, a PhD student from Iraqi Kurdistan gave voice to other aspects of *the challenge*: the difficulty of finding a focus for his research and the need for students from less developed countries to work hard in order to 'catch up' with current thinking and ideas. These remarks were produced spontaneously by Ahmed as he discussed general difficulties that he faced.

*Ahmed: ..Money is not a problem for me. The main problem for me is finding novelty in my research....*

*Me: Novelty?*

*Ahmed: Yes, finding something new, which someone hasn't done before..The transfer from MPhil onto PhD, every PhD student is worried about that transfer. You need to show novelty to make that transfer.. You know the gap between developed countries and my country is very big. We couldn't follow what is going on in the world. Here there is teaching of new ideas that I hadn't heard before. Arab countries are not developed. Need to catch up, the gap.*

*Me: Catch up?*

*Ahmed: Yes! This gap makes the PhD difficult. Every day I read 8 – 10 hours reading to catch up.*

Comments from other students supported this idea of international students feeling that in terms of their subject content they needed to work hard to bring their knowledge and expertise up to the standard required of them – that they needed firstly to catch up and bring themselves up to date with research and current thinking. Here Mahmud from Saudi Arabia echoes Ahmed:

*Mahmud: We can't just start studying! First we have to see what is going on. It's further ahead than in our country.*

*Me: Further ahead?*

*Mahmud: Things take longer to reach us. We don't have the same infrastructure. Online journal articles are harder to access. It all takes time. But here it is easy. You know immediately what is going on.*

And a number of other excerpts further reinforce this notion:

*Frank: At first I was surprised. What I thought was modern wasn't very modern at all! A bit behind. Have to understand more. Read a lot.*

*Badra: You can do research and then publish. Go to a conference and talk about it! There's a lot of ways of gaining knowledge quickly. But it seems to take longer in my country. In the library in my university – books, they are a bit old maybe. Maybe not so up-to-date as here. Need to work hard and learn what is going on now!*

Although Ahmed (as shown earlier) had said his financial situation was not an issue, this was not the case for most international students for whom personal finances were a cause for concern. For this student, concerns about his financial state made him cautious about his food:

*Me: What advice would you give to someone coming to study here from your country?*

*Zikri: How to survive! Over here it's about how to survive. I can't afford to go to a restaurant, I buy raw ingredients and cook at home. Being frugal is important. Unexpected bills will get you. Energy bills!*

Adam also raised the issue of paying for heating when discussing his life in the UK. At the time of our interview he was negotiating with the landlord about his electricity bill which he thought was too high.

*Adam: I spoke to the landlord but he hasn't come back to me. He said he will sort it out but he hasn't yet. So I'm concerned about that. I have to live on a budget. So I just switch everything off and sit in the cold.*

In regards to money, there were a number of comments from interviewees which showed that there was awareness of and a certain degree of resentment

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towards an education system which charged international students more than home students. The feeling was that they were valued for their financial contribution to the university rather than other advantages that they might be bringing to the campus.

*Alan: Money, is hard. Parents pay a lot to keep me. And fees! That is expensive. More than British students too. We know that! We think it's not fair! Maybe a bit more, but we pay a lot more.*

*Kevin: UK university education is a business! We all know that. Sometimes international students think the university is thinking about the fees. Not the teachers, teachers are very kind and help us a lot. But university like the fees we pay! I heard it is more than the students from England pay. So they want to get more!*

*Ting: Certainly money is a difficult thing. And for the fees, they are high. Would have more to live everyday if the fees are not so high. If we pay what English students pay it is much better! I know some people say we are here for our fees..*

The money situation was compounded by the difficulty that international students experienced in finding suitable part time jobs. There was a strong perception amongst international students in this study that it was harder for them to find jobs than it was for British students. In an interview with Zikri he bundled up his difficulty with finding a job into a general malaise about how he felt he was being treated harshly by the UK system:

*Zikri: Why are people suggesting international students should start paying more for that? [NHS] We already pay £12-14000 per year. Why*



*would we pay more for health support? I disagree with the current minister Theresa May. I am overlooked for jobs. I have been shortlisted for jobs but I don't get them because I'm not local.*

*Ting: I was thinking of getting a job to help me live and learn English better. But only jobs for us are in Chinese restaurants! Boss is Chinese! Might not speak much English!*

*Kevin: We want jobs. It is good to learn the language and the culture. I didn't try very hard because I know it's too hard. We know that.*

Everyday mundane issues often cropped up in interviews. The theme of eating properly and British food was often brought up. As Miriam previously mentioned, many students appeared accustomed to eating hot food at lunchtime in restaurants or university canteens, and struggled to adapt to UK lunches. Universally, they felt that British food was hard to adapt to and generally of poor quality.

*Adam: The shops close at 5 or 6 o'clock. So it can be a hassle to get food at night. You don't have good cheap restaurants that you can just go to.*

*Feng: Some other little things like the weather, and the food are not good enough. Certainly the food.*

*Frank: Food really is bad. We really miss good food from China. Cannot make do. We are used to hot food at lunch. We find the food difficult to cope.*

*Kevin: It's not easy shopping. To find what you want to cook. Tesco is cheap, but doesn't have the things we need. My friend went to Chinatown in London because he said he needed a proper meal. Yeah, just for that!*

There were some comments in regard to the difficulty that Moslems faced in meeting their obligations to pray several times a day and these ones from Asma and Mahmud are representative of them: :

*Asma: We have to pray 5 times a day and the chaplaincy is a long way away.. the weather doesn't help. It takes a long time to go there or go home and back again for praying. Not just Moslems, other religions too.*

*Mahmud: I had a tour of the university. There is a prayer room. It way over the other side of the campus. I think it's not serious to expect us to go there all the time!*

Although my interviews appeared to be open and frank about the difficulties that they faced, as discussed in *Being an outsider*, there were very few instances indeed where they discussed experiencing open racial discrimination or hostility.

Missing family and friends was a common theme and is a considered to be a further aspect of *The challenge* that international students face. When this aspect was combined with the disappointment or the fear of poor academic results the effect on students could be traumatic, as described firstly by Miriam and then by other students.

*Miriam: At the end of the final undergraduate year I was very disappointed with my study. I went to PUIC [an affiliated college running*

*a pre-masters course] then I started the MBM in January. I was very sad and homesick, especially around Chinese Spring Festival Time.*

*Asma: My mum is waiting for me! She asks me every day when are you coming back?*

*Ting: Probably hardest thing is not seeing close people from home. Especially during Spring Festival! Very sad!*

*Kevin: Scared of not doing well. After everything they do for me – my parents. Work hard, give up a lot so I can come here. I must do well!*

Overall, the little trials that international students face add up to the large *Challenge* presented here. Miriam's response to my general question about being an international student neatly summarised the general feeling gathered from all my interviewees:

*Me: What's it like being an international student at Plymouth?*

*Miriam: Hard! When I was in China and I saw my friends going to study in England, I thought it was a good experience. I thought it would be easy, but it's difficult.*

Miriam's words demonstrate how poorly prepared she was for her overseas study experience and how little her peers back home understood of the challenge that she was experiencing.

*Miriam: But really students should think more before they come here. It's not an easy thing. If you want an easy way, just travel. Here I visit some other places and I put my photos of me in other places of Facebook and*

*my friends in China say 'oh you having a good life' but it doesn't feel that way to me.*

And as she said before, even small things were hard at first:

*Miriam: When I got here even buying a bottle of water was hard!*

Miriam returned again later in her interview about being mentally ready for the experience of living and studying in the UK, something which evidently she hadn't carefully considered before coming:

*Miriam: Think before you come! I thought it would be good, enjoyable, an easy life, an easy way. At first you are shocked. It might not be the right thing if you cannot manage yourself.*

Data from other interviewees showed that it was quite common for international students, when reflecting on their experience, to consider that they had not been well-prepared for their new lives in the UK. These two extracts are indicative of other comments on this common theme in my discussions with students:

*Alan: I was looking forward to coming. Then I get here, and wow! I didn't know it would be like this.*

*Gary: Surprised when I came. I know people who had been here. People who finished their degree. They say, 'Go on. Good luck.' But they didn't say what it's like! I got here. And saw my first comments and marks on my work. And I thought oh no! This is going to be hard.*

Gary's final comment was one of similar ones which led to the *Daunted* property when analysis of data showed students' awareness of their challenge and felt overawed by the mountain they had to climb.

### **7.3 Discussion: The challenge**

This grounded theory proposes that international students experience an unexpected ordeal when they study in the UK. The following discussion returns to the literature and includes it in the data collected in this study to explore the category and its properties of *Bridging the gap*, *Catching up* and *Daunted*.

#### **7.3.1 The challenge: Overview**

The body of literature on the issue of challenges that international students face strongly supports the findings in this study. As a researcher I was interested to note two things: firstly that none of the students who were interviewed used the term 'culture shock' to describe the challenges they faced, and my second surprise was that, despite the attention given to international students' experiences and the availability of technological and educational processes to share these experiences (not least the availability of social media for students allowing students to communicate easily and freely across vast distances), the students themselves were surprised at the size of the challenge they faced and appeared unprepared for that challenge.

Researchers have repeatedly suggested that international students encounter challenges which affect many areas of their lives. Huang and Klinger (2006) interviewed Chinese students in a North American university and found that they encountered seven major challenges in their learning: financial challenges; difficulties in using Academic English; obstacles in becoming a permanent

resident; challenges in coming to terms with the classroom learning environment; their lack of critical thinking skills; acculturation problems and loneliness and academic anxiety. This list is very similar to Li and Kaye's list from a UK university (Li and Kaye, 1998) eighteen years earlier which consisted of financial difficulties, mixing with UK students, academic progress and English language problems. Such research gives us some understanding of the myriad of worries which international students experience and confirms findings in this study. Some of these concerns are less important to some students than others and the value of a grounded theory approach is the production of theory grounded in data. Consequently the following properties are derived from the most commonly found codes arising from the data and reflect concerns common to all students.

### **7.3.2 Bridging the gap**

*Bridging the gap* is the term given to the extra effort that international students from different cultures have to make in order to adjust successfully to studying and living in the UK. Data in this study shows that students quickly became aware that they needed to adjust their academic practice, but it was not always clear what adjustments they needed to make or how they might make them. The need for international students to make adjustments to their academic behaviour is broadly a matter of consensus and, with the increase in international student numbers becoming a growing phenomenon in English-speaking universities, an increasingly researched area. Hyland (2003) found that there are considerable differences in academic conventions across cultures. These variations stretch from the way that ideas and arguments are developed and presented (rhetorical conventions), the presentation and

extension of knowledge (cultural schemata) to the perspectives of writers and readers on text and how they make sense of text. Other academics have found that cultures differ in what they consider to be an argument, what is considered to be evidence to support an argument and what is thought to be relevant (Leki, 1992).

In this project the disappointment that international students experience with their marks, and their bemusement with those low marks despite hard work, shows a large gap in the expectations of the students producing the work and the lecturers marking that work. Quan *et al.* (2013) found that international students who had studied successfully in their own countries in universities for two years struggled in the UK despite the success they had had at home. Students in their study commented on difficulties such as understanding the function of a reading list because they were used to finding everything they needed in one book in China. This finding reflects data in this study which shows international students as being used to being guided directly by their teacher to the content that they are expected to learn. Quan *et al.*'s (2013) students expressed their frustration at a number of different aspects of study that they found challenging, including: not being told exactly what to do by their teachers but instead being left on their own to work it out ('I was asked to rewrite...I was not told how to change..why did the teacher not simply tell me what to do!' (Quan, et al., 2013, p. 410)); being told that there was no 'right' answer; managing much more independent study time. Most notably Quan *et al.*'s (2013) students commented on their need to 'catch up the missing parts' because their Chinese university study had not equipped them with the study skills they needed in the UK due to the differences between western and Asian styles of teaching and learning. The culture of learning in China and its

neighbouring countries has often been referred to as Confucian and students from China and surrounding countries as of being Confucian Heritage Cultural Background (CHCB) (Ryan and Louie, 2007) and much has been written about the influences of this Confucian heritage on the Chinese learner (Biggs and Watkins, 1996; Cortazzi and Jin, 2001; Watkins, 2000). Westerners have traditionally considered that a major aspect of the Chinese approach to learning to be that of a passive rote learner who makes use of 'surface' learning rather than the 'deep' approach that western education prides itself on (Samuelowicz, 1987).

More recently, however, greater attention has been paid to how CHCB students may make use of different techniques (such as repetition, memorisation) to achieve deep learning thus being unfairly categorised as robotic rote learners (Biggs, 1996). Although quite how CHCB students learn is still being investigated by western scholars, the radical differences are not in doubt, and neither is the adjustment that CHCB students need to make when they come to study in western English-speaking universities. Barron and D'Annunzio-Green (2009) found that international students coming into a Scottish university had serious academic concerns about their ability to cope with what was expected of them: they considered that their programme was too advanced for them and that they needed to work harder to keep up with their studies. Young (2006) discusses international students' learning experiences in a radically different home educational culture and their unfamiliarity with the methods of teaching, learning and assessment methods in the new educational culture that they had come to. It has been claimed that when a student has a different learning style than that of the teacher that 'the classroom becomes a place of inequity where some learners receive what they need while others do not' (Oxford and



Anderson, 1995, p. 201). Data in this study showed that while students struggled to adapt to the new demands put upon them and they felt challenged because of the differences between their home educational culture and that of the UK, they did not consider themselves as being treated unfairly.

*Bridging the gap* applies not only to the gap that students experience in their studies, but applies to the difficulties that international students experience in adjusting to a whole new life in a new country. As previously noted none of the students used the term *culture shock* to describe their experiences of being new in the UK despite the fact that we could expect second language users with their level of English to be familiar with the term. The absence of the use of the term does not suggest these students did not experience it or are not aware of it. On the contrary, the data suggests that students are very much aware of the phenomenon and Asma and Miriam used the word 'shocked' to describe the daze that new students find themselves in when they are newly arrived:

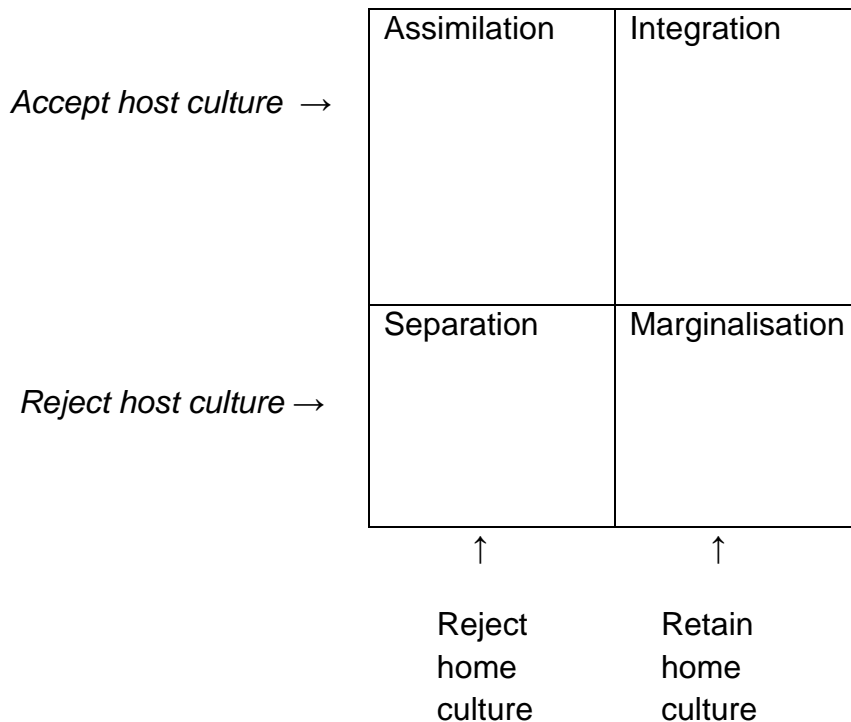
*Asma: ..the new students here are so shocked. When you are new here and when you start you have no idea...*

*Miriam: At first you are shocked....*

It could be the case that interviewees, when given a chance to explain their experiences of living and studying in the UK, preferred to describe their challenges in detail, breaking them down into specific problems, rather than use the general term 'culture shock'. Ryan's three types of shock (2005) identified in the earlier literature review (*culture shock*, *language shock* and *academic shock*) do well in highlighting particular areas that students find hard to manage and findings in this study certainly reflect those areas of difficulty. *Learning shock* (Griffiths, et al., 2004) is another label used in literature in regard to

students suffering shock, this time it is applied to more mature students who are returning to education later in life and refers to the confusion and anxiety caused by exposure to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods and conflicting expectations of staff and students.

The literature review noted the two broad approaches for discussing intercultural shock: the sociocultural learning model and the stress and coping model. A return to literature in this field highlights a third set of 'social identification theories' (Ward, et al., 2001) which become more prominent during this discussion of *acculturation*, defined as 'the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members' (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Berry's acculturation model (Berry, *et al.*, 1989; Berry, 1997) suggests a framework for understanding the degree to which newcomers to a new culture will adapt comfortably to the culture and centres on the extent to which the newcomers consider it valuable to firstly maintain their identity and culture, and secondly to maintain relationships with the new host culture. The model outlines how these psychological attitudes will dictate the extent of assimilation and integration that subsequently takes place:



**Figure 5: Berry's model of acculturation** (Berry, 1997)

Berry categorises the approach of newcomers who accept the new host culture whilst retaining their home culture as one of integration, and these individuals are predicted to experience less stress than those who find themselves being marginalised and also to adjust better and more comfortably to the host culture (Berry, 2005). Berry's psychological model has generated considerable interest, has received much support and has strongly influenced research in this field (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 1999; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). The model can be helpful in understanding the stress that international students experience, and likewise, their successes. International students in this study had not experienced the low stress situation of *Integration* because although they might be willing to accept the host culture, they were not given the opportunity to

accept it, they were outsiders and not invited to become part of the host culture. The importance of retaining home culture was shown to be an important factor for student survival in this study. This chimes with Berry's model in which retaining the home culture plays an important role in achieving the low stress state of integration. This is demonstrated clearly with Miriam from China whose self-confidence increased markedly after she successfully worked as a Chinese language teaching assistant. The retention and affirmation of her culture gave her confidence and lower stress and the ability to move forward with her second language skills:

*'I have been a Chinese teaching assistant for the three years that I have been here. It gives me confidence to talk to local people. I had no confidence to talk to local people before.'*

In fact, all the international students who were interviewed in this study showed a keen interest in learning about UK culture and could be considered as 'accepting host culture' as described in the acculturation literature and this gives them the potential of achieving the low stress position of *Integration*. However, the argument I put forward here is that they have been denied the opportunity to achieve integration because of being treated as outsiders, as discussed in the previous section *Being an outsider*.

The model above does not take into account the attitude of the host society to the newcomers, it focuses primarily on the attitude of the newcomers. However, it is the host society members who control the opportunities for engagement with the culture through participation in social activities and when those opportunities are denied to newcomers ('*we don't have topics to talk about, sort of pushed back into the Chinese group*', '*they don't care about making friends*

*with you, they are not interested in your culture and stuff*') then the newcomers become marginalised.

Zhou *et al.* (2008) have reviewed the various models of culture shock and adaptation and propose a further concept: that of 'culture synergy' which is offered in particular regard to international students' adaptation. The approach focuses on the match/mismatch of pedagogical expectations between students and institutions and makes concrete suggestions in regard to supporting international students through awareness-raising of cultural differences in education. Zhou *et al.*'s focus on pedagogy for a model of acculturation highlights the importance of study for international students and their focus on matching and mismatching supports the emergence of *Bridging the gap* as a property of *The challenge*.

Smith and Khawaja (2011) reviewed the field of acculturative experiences of international students and isolated a number of 'potential stressors' (p. 9) which were: language, educational, sociocultural, discrimination and practical or lifestyle, all of which have been noted in this study. It is the sum of these that contribute to the overall category of *The challenge*, and it is the educational and sociocultural stressors in particular which support the emergence of *Bridging the gap*. The sociocultural stressors revolve largely around the difficulty of establishing social networks because of the differences in language, culture and the nature of friendship that are so difficult to bridge. The picture of loneliness and detachment of international students that they paint supports the previous category of *Being an outsider* as well as *Bridging the gap* and this shows the complex nature of the issues which international students face and highlights the cumulative effect of their problems.

### 7.3.3 Catching up

*Catching up* is the label used to describe how many international students perceive that they need to do extra work to catch up with the other students on the course in regard to their knowledge and skills. This is closely linked to the previous subproperty of *Bridging the gap*. But whereas *Bridging the gap* attempts to describe the adjustments that students see they need to make because of differences in culture, *Catching up* emerges to describe the feeling that many students had that they were in some way 'behind' in their knowledge and skills, that they were disadvantaged because of this, and they needed to work harder to catch up with students. It is not suggested here that international students do in reality need to catch up, but this perception reflects the prominence of the 'deficit view' of international students which is common amongst university lecturers (Carroll and Ryan, 2005). This view perceives international students to lack the necessary language skills, independent learning skills, critical thinking skills and are stereotyped as rote learners who plagiarise. Carroll and Ryan (2005, p. 6) suggest that imperfect English is often taken as evidence of 'clumsy thinking' and other research already presented in this study supports the 'deficit view' of students.

In the *Struggling to communicate* chapter it has been shown that all international students, whatever their level of English, believe that their English skills are not good enough and that they need to catch up with the communication skills of their new peers. This is despite evidence of a high level of proficiency in some cases. In the same way that they perceive their language skills to be deficient, findings in this research project show that international students believe that they need to catch up in general study skills, research

skills (in the case of research students) and background knowledge on their subjects. However, these students have been previously academically successful in their home countries and there is no solid evidence to prove that their challenges are in catching up rather than adjusting. This study shows that international students are classifying themselves as needing to catch up, that is approaching their challenges from a deficit point of view, rather than needing to *Bridge the gap*. If lecturers regard their international students as deficient, which research shows is often the case, then it should not be a surprise that students feel so. This grounded theory proposes that this feeling of deficiency is a contributing aspect to the overwhelming challenge that international students experience.

#### **7.3.4 Daunted**

*Daunted* emerged as the final subproperty of *The challenge* and refers to the sum of the experiences and types of shock that international students experience including the delayed shock that international students experience when they realise the size of the challenge that they face. This grounded theory proposes that international students, having slowly become aware of the gap that needs to be bridged in living and studying in a new social and educational environment, are overawed by their challenge and feel *Daunted* by it. It is likely that this feeling is a necessary precursor to students engaging in the process of identity change that will enable them to gain the skills they need to ultimately *make the grade*. This idea that personal change and identity develop out of a sense of crisis is found in literature in regard to psychosocial identity formation and acculturation. Erikson's theory of identity development is built upon a series of challenges that humans experience at particular stages of their lives (Erikson,

1959). This theory proposes that development of an individual's identity is an emotionally stressful process of a person coming to terms with their society through a series of eight crises in their lives. Pedersen (1995) argued that initial culture shock can stimulate a process of personal growth leading to acculturation. In a similar vein, *Daunted* should be considered to stimulate personal growth leading to academic success.

#### **7.4 Conclusion to The challenge**

It is clear that international students face a wide variety of challenges during their stay in the UK, and this section has evidenced students' awareness of those challenges. It was found that students experienced many difficulties because of the practical differences, general and educational cultural differences between their home countries and the UK. It was found that international students often perceive themselves to be behind other students and that they need to catch up, despite the lack of hard evidence that this is actually the case. Students also experience severe shock of various sorts including a daunting realisation of how hard it is going to be for them to succeed. The recommendations section offers a number of steps that universities could take to support international students through the challenges that they experience.



# Chapter Eight: Findings and Discussion *Supporting each other*

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## 8.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss the category *Supporting each other*. This term is used to describe the mutual support systems which international students have constructed in the face of the difficulties that they experience whilst living and studying in the UK.

This section firstly presents the findings and results from the research carried out and then proceeds to a discussion which includes a return to the literature in the field. Literature in the area of communities of practice was found to be particularly relevant and the discussion considers to what extent the support network which students operate within can be construed as a community of practice. The discussion section is presented through the properties of the main category which emerged as: *Surviving together*, *Learning together*, and *Struggling together*.

## 8.2 Findings: Supporting each other

The findings show the crucial importance of these support networks for my interviewees and indicate that *supporting each other* is a major response to the situation they find themselves in. These networks appear to consist mostly of co-nationals and they provide students with support in many aspects of their lives: from practical day to day issues such as shopping, renting accommodation, accessing health care and travel advice to emotional, study and linguistic support. It was found that the support that students received was

not always useful: the data showed evidence of students sharing bad advice and bad practice and this reflected how they were struggling in their new and foreign environment.

The data showed that newly arrived international students receive support from a network of more experienced students who empathise strongly with the experience of being new in the UK. Asma described the need that new students have on their arrival because they are so 'shocked' with their new environment.

*Asma ... We help new students who come in.*

*Me: So the old students help the new students?*

*Asma: Yes, of course, because the new students are so shocked. When you are new here and when you start you have no idea.. we just say, go along and we will help you and everything will be fine. We make them confident about their location....*

Pang painted a clear picture of a network of co-nationals who rallied around to support her in the early difficult days, offering her assistance during her trip and in her arrival and in establishing herself in her new home.

*Pang: The nephew of the old president of my university was in Exeter. And then he knows people in London. Other research students. So I went first to them in London and then the nephew in Exeter. Then finally to Plymouth. After sleeping, so I arrived here ready to start my pre-session course.*

*Me: You did a pre-session course at first?*

*Pang: Yes, six months of English before starting my research.*

*Me: What was it like at first? Did you settle in quickly?*

*Pang: Not quickly. Slowly!*

*Me: Slowly?*

*Pang: Slowly. Very hard at first. But I met some other Thai friends. Not too many, but very useful. So useful! At first you don't know anything. They take you here, there, show you where to get your things. I think if I don't know these people, what will I do? Really. We have to do it, to show ourselves what to do.*

This practical support for fellow international students was mentioned repeatedly by students in this study who understood the immediate need for the basic necessities of life and made sure that newcomers could access them.

*Zikri: We do help and guide new people who come here. Tell them places to go, places to shop.. How to survive.*

*Feng: First thing is food, sleep, washing. Not easy when everything is new! At home it's easy – we can eat at the university, here no. Other students, they show us what to do.*

More experienced international students shared their practical knowledge and experiences with newcomers who were then able to draw on the pooled know-how of a wider community. Examples of this include references to dealing with accommodation, visa requirements, opening bank accounts and using the health service, as discussed below:

*Mahmud: My friends who were already here before me told me about a landlord who was not good to rent from. So even though it was cheap I*

*didn't go there. It's very useful, very important information. I need to know things like this.*

*Frank: People warned me about my visa and told me how to get it sorted out. It's really important. It's one of the main things we worry about. Feel scared about getting it wrong.*

*Maggie: There's so much to learn about when you are new. Where to start! Get a bank card. Get internet. All these things you have to sort out. Best thing of all is someone who has done it and can show you what to do!*

*Ting: Scared about the doctor. Because it is so different! How can you visit the doctor if you need an appointment? You don't know if you will be ill! So my classmate from China who is here already told me about the hospital, how it works. It is still strange, but she helped me understand.*

Many students also discussed the emotional support that they received from their peers. Miriam's comments show how a peer's comments had given her much needed comfort when she had been doubting herself and her abilities:

*Miriam: After talking all night with my new friend I was so happy. So relieved. To find that it wasn't only me! I thought I was the only one. I thought I was no good. But that's not right! I'm OK! I'm OK!*

Many of the comments that students made about supporting each other were in regard to studying, and this reflects the overwhelming importance that success in their studies has for international students. Interviewees described how they banded together to share their skills and knowledge to help each other in their

academic endeavours. One PhD student discussed the nature of their collaboration:

*Me: Is it very different to studying in your country?*

*Asma: Yes! Very different.....I get a lot of help from other students. And youtube! My first supervisor is youtube! I'm in a big office with about 40 students who are all studying different subjects and from different countries. We help each other and support each other. We have different values and different experiences and we support each other because we need it – especially those who didn't study masters or undergraduate degrees in the UK!*

Such comments are interesting both in regard to the support they suggest which exists between students, but also in regard to implied lack of support coming from the university. It shows a keen awareness of the varied background of the students, and the perceived deficiencies that they need to make up in order to bridge the gap in their research and study skills.

Students believe that if they pool their knowledge and resources and collaborate then they will stand a better chance of educational success. Feng painted a picture of a close-knit group of Chinese masters students working collectively to reach their aim of academic success:

*Feng: Most of the students get together and talk about the assignments and the work and do revision for the test together. Very very few Chinese students communicate with students from other countries.*

*Me: How important are the other Chinese students when you study?*

*Feng: A source of information. Because most of the time we do assignments we need to exchange ideas. We need to ask how to do this and ask about methods and theories and how to consider the analysis so group work is very important than working alone.*

*Me: Even if it is an individual piece of work do you still talk a lot?*

*Feng: Yes, even if it is individual. Because the purpose of the assignments are the same – they give us maybe some resources to use, so we have the same problems or mistakes. We ask, how do we do that, how do we use which method and how to calculate it. So even individual work we need to work together.*

The belief that marks will be higher if students work together is clearly stated:

*Me: So this is an important source of support for you?*

*Feng: Very important! In other ways we can't find too many ways to sort this problem, so we talk together and group marks are much higher than single ones.*

With this particular student the nature of the support network seemed to be entirely Chinese:

*Me: Do you ask other people outside your group of Chinese friends?  
About studying?*

*Feng: Hmm, not much. I tried before, not too much, maybe assignments I will ask them 10% 15% but Chinese friends we talk about all the assignments, the structure, what's inside, so we communicate with outside people very little..*

The extent of the collaboration and mutual support was very broad. It appeared in Feng's network that weaker students were not left to fend for themselves, but could find support from the stronger students:

*Feng....even in individual work we work together like a team, one student may find part A information or some sources or books and part B may be which method to use, which equation to use to solve the problem, which part we need to care about and where is a trap that we need to be careful about. We exchange the information or some students who are not very good at finance in our major we need to teach them maybe some very simple definition or some simple theory, tell them where you can read a book but most of the time we just explain ourselves, don't make them read a book.*

*Me: You just swap the ideas?*

*Feng: Yes, just explain, continue with the assignment, that's the fast way to continue to work.*

Again, the perception that working together meant that they all achieved more was clearly shown in the data:

*Me: Do you notice someone is going off the wrong way, if you are sharing ideas?*

*Feng: Yes, but actually, I tried to work alone but I found some people work along they will go to a different direction, maybe they can't capture the lecture's requirement, but group work people can mostly get the same ideas, simply get a higher mark, some people can work alone and*

*get a good mark but some ideas may be different – use different sentences, but the big points, the main points are the same.*

Feng's comments about the 'direction' of study were mirrored by Cuifen who also described how students would help each other so that they were all on track with their academic studies:

*Cuifen: We usually share so make sure everyone is going in the right direction, we wouldn't let someone go on the wrong way.*

It was interesting to learn that these networks stretched beyond the single educational institution as students kept in touch with their compatriot friends who were studying in different British universities:

*Feng: My best friends are at Reading, Luton, Surrey and Bristol. I talked with them and asked how they are working and I found some universities are really good.*

*Me: What do you discuss?*

*Feng: Similar...like marks, how to improve our marks. Find some problems, we talk and say how to solve that problem, but just talk with friends, very good way to solve that.*

One very active Malaysian international student who volunteered to be interviewed had been elected as a representative for a student group:

*Gary: Next year I am going to be the President of the Chinese Enterprise Society .*

*Me: I've heard about that. It'll be a good experience.*



*Gary: Yes, I have been elected to be leader for the next year. It's because I think it is so important to do things to create a support network for international students. It's a social place with a business aspect to it.*

Gary shows here his conscious awareness of the need for formal arranged groups which can offer support. This is in contrast to much of the mutual support which appears to be informal, but still reliable and trustworthy. Many interviewees referred to these relationships in response to a general question which I asked to prompt students on this issue. The following excerpts show my question and a few of the responses that were given.

*Me: So how do you manage all the time? Who do you go to if you need help with things?*

*Ting: First is friends. See them every day. We phone and text all the time! Walk together, don't like walking home in the dark so we plan together when we will go home.*

*Kevin: Depends on what kinds of things. For study, classmates. Or lecturer. But always Chinese friends!*

*Mahmud: My friends. We came together from our country and now do everything the same! Sometimes it's not too good. But usually we can know everything will be OK.*

*Maggie: We talk together. Our group. We tell each other what to do so we can all do it and look after each other. Not let anyone go down, that is the important thing.*

I was interested to find out to what extent students consulted each other in regard to their academic study and it seemed that they did so frequently, but

with some caution as students knew that the other students were not experts themselves, and might not necessarily have the best advice to offer. Frank's comments here are one example of a number of times that students admit to helping each other despite their lack of expertise:

*Frank: Yes, we ask our lecturer. And other students. But my friend told me wrong. He said no, you reference like this, and told me one way. Then I hand in and get a bad mark and my lecturer said 'I told you how to do it' but I listened to my friend. I think he doesn't know.*

Ting had a similar experience in which the lecturer had shown some irritation with virtually a whole class of students who had failed to complete a coursework task properly. It appeared that there had been a collective failure to understand what the lecturer had wanted from them. Ting brought up the incident in response to a 'fishing' question about how her friends and other classmates collaborated and shared their academic practice:

*Me: Do you help each other much in your academic work?*

*Ting: All the time! Talking about what to do. What the teacher wants. Not easy to get! Yes, share things. But that's not always good!*

*Me: What do you mean?*

*Ting: We had presentations in class and we made references to a source. But everyone in class made the same reference because we had shared the idea. We don't know who had the idea first, but we all used it. Probably not good. There is a need to be original and show your own ideas, not the same idea as everyone else. Anyway, it was not a good*

*reference to use. So the lecturer was angry, not angry! Not happy about how we all got it wrong!*

Kevin also commented on a time when a friend had been annoyed with her co-national group member who had insisted on doing the coursework in a particular way. Kevin's comments were in response to the same question that Ting had been asked.

*Me: Do you help each other much in your academic work?*

*Kevin: Yes, often. Sometimes have to because of group work. That's not always easy. Can have problems with that sometimes.*

*Me: Can you tell me a bit more about that?*

*Kevin: Hmm. It happens. My friend was angry with her group work member who made their group do it in a particular way. But it was wrong way and they got a bad mark.*

### **8.3 Discussion: Supporting each other**

This grounded theory proposes that one of the main ways that international students respond to the challenges that they face is by *supporting each other*.

The following discussion is broken down into sections focusing on the properties of *surviving together*, *learning together*, and *struggling together*.

The literature review suggested that Communities of Practice (CoP) theory could help us to understand the support that international students offer each other and how they gain the skills that they need to in order to live and study successfully in the UK. This discussion considers the nature of the mutual

international student support and learning networks and explores how useful CoP theory is in explaining the processes at work.

### **8.3.1 Supporting each other: overview**

International students form strong groups whose members offer each other practical, emotional and academic support. These support networks also appear to function as learning communities, providing the means by which international students gain everyday survival skills, academic skills and language skills which enable them to cope and ultimately succeed in their studies. Students form these networks out of need: it has already been shown how international students struggle to communicate with home students and the host society, feel like outsiders and feel daunted by the challenges they face. Their response is to turn to fellow outsiders and help each other through their shared difficulties. The way they help each other has been divided into two broad areas: everyday practical support, here labelled as *surviving together*, and academic support, labelled *learning together*. However, because international students are outsiders and newcomers to a new environment they often lack skills and knowledge, or these resources may be inadequate. In these cases they may share these poor skills and knowledge. This phenomenon has been called *Struggling together*.

### **8.3.2 Surviving together**

This grounded theory proposes that international students support each other in facing and coping with every day practical challenges of survival through a support network which can be considered a community of practice (CoP). Identifying their behaviour as a CoP gives a framework for understanding how the skills are passed on to newcomers and how those newcomers become

learners engaged in a process of identity change over a period of time, moving from being a newcomer to an expert. International students arriving in the UK are in the same boat as:

*“..a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other to cope.”* (Wenger, 2006, p. 1)

As noted in chapter two, CoP theorists (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2006; Wenger and Trayner, 2014) have claimed that there are three crucial characteristics of communities of practice: the domain, the community, and the practice. It is argued here that these three characteristics are clearly present in the support networks which have been described in this project.

The first of these characteristics is an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Such a domain does not need to be a group of experts, but there needs to be a commitment to the domain and a shared competence (Wenger and Trayner, 2014). If a youth gang developing strategies to survive on the street can be considered a legitimate domain for a community of practice, then it makes sense to recognise international students working together as a similar legitimate domain. In Lave and Wenger’s early work (Lave and Wenger, 1991) they studied domains of apprenticeships in various professions and other writers have studied communities of practice in the areas of industry (such as in the case of Xerox (Brown and Dugoid, 2000)). Our domain in this study (being an international student) certainly includes a commitment from its members: as has been demonstrated already, international students expend huge efforts to meet the challenges that they face in living and studying in a foreign country.

Certainly we could consider international students to have a shared competence in their survival know-how: as described in the findings section we

heard about students sharing their knowledge in dealing with accommodation, the health system, visas, and other day to day practical issues. It could also be argued that this competence they share distinguishes community members from non-members (Wenger, 2006) because although non-members would value some of the competencies shared within the community, only members would value the full range of shared competencies provided through the community.

The second characteristic of CoPs is considered to be the community and again the data collected in this research describes international students interacting in a way closely reflecting communities in CoP literature: that is 'they build relationships that enable them to learn from each other' (Wenger, 2006, p. 2) and involve themselves in joint activities and discussions to support each other. The CoP community is therefore the practice of mutual engagement and it is this mutual engagement which gives the community its coherence. When new international students arrive in their new environment it is the more experienced members of the international student community that they turn to for help and support, people who they readily identify with, rather than people outside that community who have not experienced the challenges that those new students are facing.

The third characteristic of a CoP is its *practice* by which is meant what the members of the CoP actually do. CoP members work together to create a set of shared skills, knowledge and resources which they exploit in their daily challenge: a *shared repertoire*. This repertoire includes 'routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions of concepts'. (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). The word 'repertoire' for Wenger is used because it

suggests both practice resulting from a history of rehearsed practice, and the existence of a resource which can be further exploited in the future. Again, my research reflects a 'shared repertoire' of resources which international students have developed over a period of time and pass on for newcomers to learn and use: the know-how of dealing with visa regulations is one example of a shared repertoire from the international student CoP.

### **8.3.3 Learning together**

It is not new to recognise students as being members of CoPs. McDowell and Montgomery (2006) considered the networks of international students they observed in a UK university to be a community of practice and they showed the importance of social networks to the students' learning. Their findings are similar to findings presented in this study in that international students learn from each other, working in a supportive and collaborative atmosphere. When Feng said that '*we need to work together....in other ways we can't find too many ways to sort this problem, we talk together and group marks are much higher than individual ones*' he is describing a learning community which focuses on the importance of the shared endeavour and involvement in the activities of their community (Rogoff, 1994). In *Struggling to communicate* it was discussed how students worked together to improve their language skills, and this theme of mutual endeavour is mentioned repeatedly through student interviews. CoP theory helps us understand how international student learning takes place through participation in their communities: it is a situated activity involving the acquisition of knowledge and skills through a social process which sees new international students moving from legitimate peripheral participation in a community (Lave and Wenger, 1991) towards full participation as they gain

the skills and knowledge that a successful international student needs to possess.

#### **8.3.4 Struggling together**

CoP theory also helps to explain the difficulties that international students experience when living and studying in the UK. Wenger claims that the energy of communities can actually prevent people from responding well to new situations, or from moving on: the complexity is that the community supports and gives meanings to participants' lives, yet can also 'hold us hostage to that experience.' (Wenger, 1998, p. 85). Data from my interviews strongly support the idea that students' networks do indeed appear to greatly support the international students whilst at the same time preventing them building up networks with the host community:

*Alice: In my first year in Plymouth I didn't know anything, all the Chinese students are just living together. In my first year I was the same. All Chinese students in the same group. It's just like being in China-speaking Chinese all the time except living in Plymouth....My parents asked me about Plymouth what it's like...I didn't know. I really didn't know anything about Plymouth...only knew about fish and chips.*

It is argued that the communities of practice which have been uncovered in this research are both supportive and restrictive in their nature and this is reflected in the wider literature. Li (2012b) found that a Chinese cohort he carried out research on operated as a 'surrogate family' for its members, supporting, caring and encouraging one another. Yet at the same time they blamed their lack of progress in their English skills on their group membership.



The concept of legitimate peripheral participation also helps us to understand the difficulties that international students have in gaining the academic skills that they need in order to be successful students. In Lave and Wenger's original CoP theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) the centre of the community of practice was populated by experts. Such experts might be experienced and very competent workers in professions and trades, and the newcomers to the community of practice would be apprentices entering the profession. As the apprentices learn, they change their identity and move closer into the centre of the practice, becoming experts themselves. It is indeed the case that international students become experts at living and surviving in the UK. However, international students do not necessarily become experts in the academic skills that are required of them at university: data in this study showed interviewees still struggling academically (we should remember Feng's comment: *Chinese students, some work very hard and they can't get a high mark and they don't know why. I think maybe 80% of Chinese students say 'what do lecturers want?'*). CoP theory explains why these students may still be struggling: they are operating within a learning community of international students which may collectively lack the expertise required. Although supportive, the CoP that international students learn through, could, in some ways, be considered impoverished if the shared repertoire that they exploit is constructed by members of a CoP which is itself marginalised. This argument is supported by data analysed in this study. When Frank described how he followed his friend's advice on how to reference and got it wrong (*my friend told me wrong. He said no, you reference like this..but my friend told me wrong*) he is evidencing both the social aspect of his learning – that it takes place through social participation - and the impoverished nature of that learning community.

Similarly, students share a repertoire of practices that would be considered poor academic practice by outsiders to that community. As Cuifen related:

*Cuifen: They translate from the Chinese into English and then no one will find out they copy because they don't need to put references...so quite often they do that..*

And as Feng said:

*Feng: Feng) Most students have a Chinese copy (of the core text), especially for their bachelor degree, especially their final year. Most students read the Chinese book first and then the English. That's a good student. Some just read the Chinese.. We know it's not good. Our advisor told us 'the best thing you can do is to throw away your Chinese version of the book and read it in English. Then you can learn English and the subject together. If you translate all the time, it's not going to work'. We know that.*

Wenger's later writing explains how the production of practice need not necessarily be a positive process, that practitioners can be misguided, that a community of practice itself could be 'counterproductive' or 'harmful'. (Wenger, 2009, p. 2). There is however logic to the participants and the practice: the participants produce a practice which reflects their engagement with their situation.

Wengers' concept of reification (Wenger, 2009) further explains how and why students may share poor practice. Reification, the creation of tools, documents and processes by a CoP, describes how an idea achieves a fixed status. A list of rules and a written guide for students are examples of reification. Reification,

combined with participation is considered fundamental to a CoP. The lack of reification in aspects of international students shared practices makes those practices ‘..unanchored and uncoordinated’ (Wenger, 2009, p. 225). Most importantly, CoP theory explains why international students often feel like *outsiders* and why they face *the challenge*: they are not mutually engaged with and working alongside home students.

CoP theory also offers an understanding of why it can be hard for outsiders to influence the habits and practices of a group. It explains how a group creates and owns their practice: it is the community that owns and negotiates its enterprise. Any outsider (such as a lecturer, a tutor, or an advisor) wanting to influence international student behaviour needs to know that their influence will be mediated by the community and its practice. The theoretical framework goes some way to explaining why international students persist with practices that their academic advisors may well be advising them against, that they follow practices that they themselves know not necessarily to be *good practice*, but is all the same *their practice*. As Wenger explains:

*‘To do what they are expected to do, the claims processors produce a practice with an inventiveness that is all theirs. Their inventive resourcefulness applies equally to what the company probably wants and to what it probably does not want’* (Wenger, 1998, p. 79).

Wenger’s study focused on insurance claims processors in a large company. If *claims processors* and *company* are substituted by *international students* and *university* we can begin to understand that international students have invented a wide array of strategies to survive many of which would not be approved of by the university. The shared practice in a CoP is a collective response to the

shared endeavour, their practice belongs to the community and external forces have no direct power over that practice – it is the community which negotiates its enterprise and negotiates its practices. In such an environment, it is to be expected that external players, in our case lecturers, study skill advisors and language support teachers, will have a limited impact on the practices of the community.

A further point of discussion in regard to international students' CoPs is the consideration of the existence of other CoPs which international students are not part of. Research has shown how international students operate in CoPs and therefore it makes sense to assume there are other CoPs which they are not part of, in which repertoires of skills and knowledge exist, and which they would benefit from being part of. Hislop (2004) claims that the sharing of knowledge *between* communities of practice is a neglected issue in the literature in this field. He points out that the very characteristics of communities of practice which make it so easy to facilitate knowledge within the community actually may inhibit knowledge sharing between communities. This idea is not new: Wenger himself (Wenger, 2009) commented that communities of practice could be obstacles to learning and there is a need to balance a community's practice with the ability to shake free from that practice and that this is only possible where 'communities interact with and explore other perspectives beyond their boundaries' (Wenger, 2009, p. 3).

Hislop (2004) notes that plenty of communities of practice literature outlines how collective identity and values alongside a shared base of knowledge facilitate knowledge sharing, but that between separate communities these missing features will limit inter-community sharing. If knowledge is easily shared

within communities because of the commonalities of members, then Hislop believes that 'perspective taking' and 'perspective making' are required before people can hope to understand knowledge, values and assumptions of other communities. The key to this is building trust and extensive face-to-face interaction. Hislop identifies this issue of trust between communities as key to effective engagement between communities and draws on a body of literature which recognizes trust as a key factor in sharing knowledge between communities.

#### **8.4 Conclusion to Supporting each other**

This research has found that international students have very supportive networks which help them survive and study at university and that it is useful to recognise these as communities of practice. The networks described by students in their interviews strongly reflected those described in the CoP literature with the key elements of CoPs being present: domain, community and practice.

Although these CoPs offer a great deal of support to students, they also set up barriers between groups and it can be difficult to influence their practices. In some cases, students share poor practice because they lack the requisite skills and knowledge and it can be difficult for different CoPs to share assets.

The conclusion and recommendation section at the end of this research study follows up on this discussion with considerations of what universities can do to further support international students, enhance their support networks and positively impact on the practices shared in those networks. CoP theory has offered a sound framework for understanding how students support each other

and it also explains the process of learning as one of identity change which is discussed in depth in the following section *Making the grade*.

# Chapter Nine: Findings and Discussion *Making the grade*

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## 9.1 Introduction

At some midway point during the collection and data analysis in this project, the core overarching theme of *Making the grade* began to emerge. Although I was aware that there needed to be a core category for the study, it was not at all clear initially that this was it. However, as the process of analysis continued, the theme of *Making the grade* stood out more and more strongly amongst the emergent codes, embraced all the others, and most importantly, explained the way that international students met the challenges that they faced in living and studying in the UK. *Making the grade* explains the process of identity change that international students necessarily undergo as they gradually learn the language skills, the academic literacy skills, the sociocultural skills and everyday practical and survival skills that a student cannot succeed without. In this way, identity change can be considered a macro-strategy that international students employ in order to manage themselves and meet their goals. The core category emerged as a grounded theory derived from the earliest and most obvious categories which had leapt out through the data during initial collection and analysis; the core category therefore emerges as the final stage of hypothesising.

## 9.2 Findings: Making the grade

In the following findings section excerpts of new interview data are presented which support the emergence of *Making the grade* but these are limited because this main category also draws on data which contributed to the previous categories. This section is followed by a discussion of the category *Making the grade* and its properties *Shifting identities, Investing, and Gaining legitimacy*.

Bolin was one of many students for whom mastering his English language skills was an important part of *Making the grade*.

*Bolin: English is part of learning.... It has been difficult learning English. Previously in China I would think in Chinese and then translate, but I don't do this anymore. I can speak English directly. Now I am an English speaker!*

His final sentence shows his claim to a new identity. Bolin goes on to link his English language development with his overall self-development:

*Bolin: In China I do what I need to do but the efficiency is very bad. In the UK I follow their habits to make a plan and this is an efficient way to improve myself.....I like my work and English. I find some words very beautiful. I know I am doing my job well. I can see my progress....*

And at the same time he hints at the deeper changes that may be occurring:

*Bolin: ....I can learn to correct my drawbacks.*



Bolin seems to suggest that he is taking advantage of his situation to improve not only his language, but other weaknesses too, and this indicates a larger change that he is undergoing.

Data from Maggie, another PhD student, also demonstrated how the mastery of English was an important aspect of *Making the grade*. In discussing what advice she would give to a new student she commented:

*Maggie: I would tell a new person to go out and make contact with people. I'm lucky, when I met people they spoke slowly for me. Coming to terms with English is the main thing for me.*

Like Bolin, Maggie considered that the challenge she experienced had put her through a beneficial experience:

*Maggie: I think it's harder for me than for British students. But it's a very good experience and it makes me stronger.*

Kevin's data also showed a link between English language development, his relationship with L1 English speakers and identity change.

*Me: Has your English improved since you came here?*

*Kevin: Yes. At first slowly. Very difficult at first. I had to do a group work with students, foreign students. British students. I just let them do it. But then later we had to do some more group work and they thought they would just do it like the last time. But I said my opinion. It should be like this. And then they listened and they agreed. I could do my part in it. After that discussion, I felt better. And afterwards I said hello to those students and they said hello to me.*

*Me: That sounds like a positive experience.*

*Kevin: Yes. My English was better and I could say more. More confident. Little steps, moving forward. Getting better, step by step. It's like ...becoming a better student! I learnt what I need to do.*

Ting also demonstrated her changing relationship with people around her during her stay in university accommodation and she linked this to her growing confidence in herself and in her improving language skills.

*Me: ....When did things start to get better?*

*Ting: After I went on holiday to Europe. When I came back I talked to the girls in my kitchen. For the first time! Before we just said hello but that was all. After my holiday I talked to them. About where I went and what I saw. Because they were talking about holidays and I joined their conversation.*

*Me: Why didn't you talk to them before?*

*Ting: I don't know. Maybe a bit scared. But then I became more confident. And better at talking....*

For Miriam, *Making the grade* meant being able to look after herself so she was eating properly, was wearing clean clothes and could manage her time. Her comments clearly show that it had taken her three years to master the survival skills she needed in England, three years to *Make the grade*:

*Miriam: My first year in Plymouth I hardly ate, I was hungry, I didn't manage things. In my second year it was better. In my third year, I can do it.*

For Miriam, this difficult process of change resulted in her becoming a confident person who now had the skills and life knowledge to survive. Her comments show how she considered that she had 'come of age':

*Miriam: Think before you come...I thought it would be good, enjoyable, an easy life an easy way..it might not be the right thing if you cannot manage yourself...*

*Me: Was it the right thing for you?*

*Miriam: Definitely. I improved my self-control. My parents don't need to worry about me now.*

And like the other students above, Miriam acknowledged how she had emerged as a stronger and better individual as a result of the challenges she faced and the process of change that she went through:

*Me: What advice would you have for someone coming to study in the UK?*

*Miriam: Manage your time, your food, your clothing, and your study.*

*Good time management is very important. My friends think I'm having a great time. It's a good value for me. A good experience for me. It pushes me and improves me.*

Mahmud and Badra's comments contributed to the emergence of this key category because of the new identities they attributed to themselves after the personal changes they had been through. Mahmud's comments came after a discussion about how he had built his confidence through meeting people at a language club.

*Mahmud: After a while everything slowly got better. Met more people.*

*Me: How did you meet people?*

*Mahmud: Firstly through English Club. Talk a little. Get more confident.*

*Then talk more to everybody. Got better at talking, no actually better at meeting people. Like a new person!*

*Badra: It was very hard at first. Too hard! But now it's better. Not perfect but better.*

*Me: How do you feel about going home at the end of your studies?*

*Badra: It will be strange. But I will be ready. I am ready now for anything in my life. I am different now!*

Gary was representative of many interviewees when he related his mixed feelings of how his overseas experience had changed him, and how these changes although ultimately positive, had been disorientating and confusing in the short term.

*Me: What's it like being an international student at Plymouth?*

*Gary: [laughs] not easy. Not easy at all. But it's better now. Feeling much more settled.*

*Me: How long did it take you to feel more settled?*

*Gary: Not for a long time. It took a long time. I went home for a visit. I came back, and it was better. So much better. I knew what to do when I come from London, where to go. I could manage. Feeling good. Feeling*

*like I am at home. My supervisor said my work was better. But then I had to go home again because of my family...came back, and hard again. Like the first time again.*

Feng expressed similar feelings of confusion when he talked about going back to China, and then feeling out of place there.

*Feng: When I went back to China last summer and my friend talked to me which place I liked best. I was looking forward to going home. Then not, and I said Plymouth. I changed my place! Go back, go back to Britain, not go back to China!*

Interviewees showed how students' identity changed as they changed their location: from being a foreigner to being a local, and being a second language speaker to a native speaker. Alice even described how as she moved location her skills changed too:

*Alice:...When I go back to China I can't speak English! It's terrible. I see people on the metro and try to help them, give them directions, but I can't speak English in China!*

Later on in his interview Gary made comments which were representative of a number of students' remarks on the theme of having passed through a long ordeal but having learnt from it.

*Gary: And I will finish next month.*

*Me: How do you feel about that?*

*Gary: Very good! I am happy to finish. It was hard, it is hard. But I think I can manage it, the submission and the viva. After everything. To do it! To survive it!*

*Me: You've learnt a lot?*

*Gary: Yes, but not from study. Just a little from study. Actually the study is not the important thing.*

*Me: What do you mean?*

*Gary: Now I can go somewhere new and survive. That's what we learn. We are independent now. My parents came to visit and they were surprised. I could show them around, and I could speak to local people. They said I had changed and they were proud of me.*

Frank also mentioned the difficulty of his ordeal but he looked forward to the recognition that he would receive when he got his award.

*Me: Do you feel as if you have learned a lot during your study?*

*Frank: Of course!*

*Me: Has it been very difficult?*

*Frank: Yes. Very difficult! But I did it and now I can do other things too. I can't wait for the graduation day. I will throw my hat in the air and everyone will see me. I will be like all the others.'*

Alan also showed that the reward he would receive in the end was what kept him going when things had been particularly hard.

*Alan: Yes, it was hard. Sometimes, terrible. Staying up all night! The presentations are the worst! But I think of my Masters and I keep going. In the end I will have that! It keeps me going.*

### **9.3 Discussion: Making the grade**

This grounded theory proposes that international students undergo a process of identity change during their stay in the UK, and it is this process, labelled here as *Making the grade* and emerging as the core category, which draws the other categories and their properties together into an overarching grounded theory which explains how international students respond to the challenges they face. The following discussion begins with an overview of the category, followed by sections on its properties: *Shifting identities*, *Investing* and *Gaining legitimacy*.

#### **9.3.1 Making the grade: overview**

Analysis of the data and extensive further reading suggest that the identity change which international students progress through during their sojourn in the UK, a gradual process which seems to occur on both conscious and sub-conscious levels, is a response to the challenges that they face living and studying in the UK. Whilst in the short term students may resort to crude short term survival strategies which might initially suggest a lack of sophistication and understanding of effective study strategies, it can be argued that these short term strategies are exactly that: a desperate response to an urgent and pressing need. Meanwhile however, the same students are involved in a longer term gradual process of identity change during which they gain the survival, study, and linguistic skills which they need in order to gain academic success. Gaining these skills changes the individual's identity, they move through a

complex number of shifting identities, emerging as someone with the required skills and knowledge, having *Made the grade*.

As is the case with a grounded theory study, the brief literature review did not attempt to predict issues and concepts that would emerge because of the danger of forcing the data and prejudicing the researcher. The following discussion section visits the literature of identity change and uses it as further data, to be interwoven with my data in the generation of theory.

### **9.3.2 Shifting identities**

The term *Shifting identities* emerged to describe how students started to adjust to their challenges by engaging in a process of identity change. '*Shifting*' should not be considered as a steady, one-directional process of change, but a complex, messy, difficult, fluctuating, ongoing process which sees an individual with multiple, changing identities.

This phenomenon of multiple identities emerged through data in this study and chimes with post-modern views in literature in regard to the complexities of life in the modern world. This view of the world, a world in which

*'Modern social life is characterised by profound processes of the reorganisation of time and space, coupled to the expansion of disembedding mechanisms – mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances'* (Giddens, 1991, p. 2)

sees individuals as needing to explore themselves and construct themselves in order to process personal and social change. And this exploration and reconstruction can be difficult and stressful because whereas in previous times an individual's identity change tended to be more predictable, in the modern world the increased freedom we have over that identity change causes



emotional turmoil. A reading of Giddens shows us how international students will struggle to make sense of their biographical narratives in new social contexts. It could be argued that the 'false performances' that Giddens discusses (Giddens, 1991, p. 58), which are carried out by individuals who feel that they are acting out routines rather than following them for valid reasons, are indicative of the way international students need to adopt new practices without fully understanding them, and 'severe dislocation' is likely (ibid). Similarly Mendieta (2003), discusses the changing nature of identity in a post-colonial world where 'our identities are many; they are always negotiated..' (p. 409). Hall (2000) theorized that:

*Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. (p. 7)*

The understanding that identity is not something fixed, but uncertain and open to change and negotiation, is particularly relevant to cases where individuals move across borders and meet new societies. They find themselves needing to rebalance their sense of identity as they struggle to find new points of reference.

Block (2007), adopting a poststructuralist stance on identity change, notes the interest in 'more nuanced, multileveled, and ultimately, complicated framings of the world around us' (p. 864) and summarises the *third place* ideas of Bhabha (1994), and Hall (1996) which are the result of these struggles: rather than an individual just adding a new part to their old identity, they move into a new one which includes 'a negotiation of difference' (Paperstergiadis, 2000) in which past and present times meet and change each other 'in the presence of fissures, gaps and contradictions' (p864 in Block, 2007). Block also discusses the key concept of *ambivalence* which he explains as the contradictions and

discomforts that individuals experience when they move into new environments: of not being able to decode situations properly and not knowing what actions to take. Kinginger (2010) reflects on this ambivalence as the 'pain that people experience when old identities lose their relevance' (Kinginger, 2010, p. 216) and describes the *negotiation of difference* as the work that individuals do to create new identities when they find themselves in new sociocultural environments. The negotiation of difference is then an integral part of identity and identity change. Her contention is that the negotiation of difference results from engagement with the new environment and requires investment, a concept which has emerged as another of the properties of the category *Making the grade*.

Weedon's work (Weedon, 1996 and Weedon, 2004) is also useful in helping us to understand how international students are responding to their challenges by engaging in identity change. For Weedon (1996), identity is socially constructed and multiple social selves are constructed as individuals who interact with others change across time and place; she calls social identity *subjectivity* and her work explores the effect of power relations on an individual. In her poststructuralist identity theory the individual is diverse, contradictory, dynamic, and multiple. The identity of the individual is a site of struggle, and is made up of a maze of power relations which an individual holds with other people and which may contradict each other. Weedon recognises the importance that language plays in these relationships: it is the place where an individual's sense of themselves is constructed. When Maggie said: "*If you are not confident with your English, you are not confident with yourself.*" she was reflecting the important role that language plays for an individual in confirming their identity and their comfort with that identity. Similarly when Miriam said: "*I did a Chinese*

*language teaching assistant. I am proud. It gives me the confidence to learn English.*” she is describing how that through having her original identity confirmed and appreciated, she could confidently move forward with the identity changes that she needed to make to learn new skills. The link between identity and personal development is clearly evidenced.

Weedon’s identity, or subjectivity, has three characteristics: its nature is multiple, it is a site of struggle and it changes over time. This poststructuralist approach to identity views the individual as diverse, full of contradictions, dynamic and multiple. An individual’s social identity consists of a range of complex factors involving an individual’s different roles (parent, friend, child, employee) which may well come into conflict with each other. This framework helps us to understand how our international students cope with the demands of surviving their complex lives in which they travel widely and are frequently obliged to change their social, educational and linguistic environments: they are able to operate in these different environments because of their multiple identities which develop in response to the needs put upon them. Language plays a key role in Weedon’s identity. In the process of using language, individuals become subjects, yet their access to this process of becoming is governed by power relations of inclusion and exclusion. These relations are often ‘based on visual signifiers of difference that acquire particular meanings in racist, heterosexist and patriarchal societies’ (Weedon, 2004, p. 13). Again, this theory reflects findings in this study in which international students experienced their lives in the UK as *Being an outsider* and often found themselves excluded from the host society. Weedon further argues that western racialized forms of subjectivity and identity produce resistances, and that groups who are discriminated against seek to reclaim a positive identity, and this explains how

international students turn to each other as discussed in the property *Recreating home*. Foucault (1981) has called such reclamations *reverse discourses*. A reverse discourse can be seen in Miriam's comments when she reaffirmed her Chinese identity through teaching, and this gave her the confidence to continue with her struggle through learning and identity change.

The literature of multiple identities is particularly relevant to international students because of the way that they move frequently across borders, in and out of different societies, languages and power relationships. Harris (2009) considers students who are sojourning as social actors whose practices depend on their social position in their new environment, and are therefore highly variable. Pollock and van Reken's (1999) observation that international students see themselves as out of place both at home and abroad, always feeling that they belong in the other place could have been written for Feng in this study who wanted to go back to China and then found that he was out of place: "*I changed my place! Go back to Britain, not go back to China!*" The changing nature of international students' identities is also demonstrated in Li's (2012a) investigation into a cohort of Chinese students on a postgraduate degree course at a university in the UK in which students struggled with identity change as they experienced multiple pressures pulling them in different directions. There were adaptation processes at work at the individual level as some students reworked their identities by converting to Christianity and others wanted to reaffirm their Chinese identity. At the collective level they maintained their identity of their national group, which was itself collectively undergoing change. He concluded that 'their stay represented a process of both professional and personal transformation and growth' (Li, 2012a, p. 45).

The label *Shifting identities* includes one of the most important areas of identity change that international students engage with during their stay in the UK which is in the area of English language learning. The identity change approach to language learning considers that when learners interact in the second language they are engaged in a process of identity construction and negotiation (Norton and Toohey, 2001), of organising who they are, and their relationships with others is key in this (Norton-Pierce, 1995). What is notable in this research is how students' psychological well-being was closely linked to their language learning and successful contact with English speakers. Ting, Kevin and Mahmud all described how things started to get better when they had gained some sociolinguistic skills and could interact more comfortably with English speakers. The development of their relationships with English speakers was an integral part of their positive identity change and their change to being active participants in conversations with English speakers shows their changing identities over time.

This identity approach to language learning contrasts with more traditional theories of second language acquisition (SLA) which are reviewed by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) and Ellis (2008). SLA theories in this body of literature tend to focus on innate language learning abilities of humans and individual learner differences whereas the identity approach to language learning focuses on the learner's changing social relationships with target language (TL) speakers. In the SLA literature, in regard to our context of international students studying at university, Schumann's (1978) Acculturation Model offers a consideration of the importance of the relationship between language learners and the TL group. Language learning is seen as part of the process of acculturation:

*Second language acquisition is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language*  
(Schumann, 1978a, p. 34)

Schumann is interested in the social and psychological distance between the language learner and the host community's language and culture. The model offers a consideration of power relationships in language learning. One of the factors which help determine this social and psychological distance is whether the TL groups and second language groups view each other as socially equal (Schumann, 1978b). This model helps to explain why our international students initially struggle to interact with TL speakers: there is a big social and psychological distance between them. The international students' lack of cultural and social capital puts them on an unequal footing with TL speakers.

Other SLA theories may be less useful in explaining the difficulties that international students have in interacting with English speakers. Researchers interested in the role of identity in language learning, such as Norton-Pierce (1995), believe that SLA theories do not fully address the role that power relations play in language acquisition. Norton-Pierce (1995) considers that SLA theorists have yet to explain the changes learners feel, how they move from being motivated to unmotivated, how sometimes they are talkative, other times silent. Most importantly for Norton however, SLA theorists have not attempted to explain how power relations affect the social interaction that leads to language acquisition:

*Second language theorists have not adequately explored how inequitable relations of power limit the opportunities second language learners have to practice the target language outside the classroom. In addition, many have assumed that learners can be defined unproblematically as motivated, or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited, without considering that such affective factors are frequently socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly*

*coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual* (Norton, 2000, p. 6).

To Norton identity means 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across space and time, and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (Norton, 2000, p. 6). Norton's discussion is particularly relevant to this study of international students studying at a UK university. Norton claims that Heller (1987, in Norton, 2007) successfully showed that an individual negotiates a sense of self across different locations and time frames and that language gives or denies access to powerful social networks that give individuals the opportunity to speak. This means that language is not simply a medium of communication but carries social meaning. Norton's definition of identity is inextricably linked to the notion of power. Identity construction for language learners can only be understood in reference to power relations between language learners and target language speakers. Norton's 'power' is not only seen in authorities at institutional levels (the law, education, economics) but also plays a role in everyday encounters between individuals who have different levels of access to resources. And power is not something physically possessed but a relationship: 'the socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed and validated' (Norton, 2000, p. 8). Norton illustrates her argument with vignettes featuring immigrant language learners whose access to language learning opportunities is controlled by others in powerful positions (such as employers) who also control the learners' material resources.

The language learner's identity is understood through the prisms of relationships with other people who are in positions of power. The language

learners have little power to control their interactions with such powerful people as employers who offer important opportunities to gain language learning practice. Norton believes that the language learners' situation shows the unequal power relations between French speakers and immigrant language learners in Quebec. Here, it is the French speakers who have control over the symbolic resources (the French language) and material resources (the wages that the employer pays the language learners). Importantly, in this context the learners do not have the power to take control or maximise the language learning opportunities with employers: that would be inappropriate and might even jeopardise their employment; they can only make use of the few chances that they get. For this reason, identity is linked to power, and as individuals' circumstances change across time and space and as their power relations around them change, so their identity changes too.

The parallels between Norton's powerless immigrants in Canada and international students in the UK are striking. International students struggle to communicate, are disadvantaged because of their lack of language skills and are excluded from the language learning opportunities that full participation in the host society would present to them. The properties *Reaching out* and *Being ignored* showed how international students' attempts to gain access to the host society are rebuffed. Cuifen's comments: "*They don't care about making friends with you, they are not interested in your culture and stuff. That's one complaint I hear a lot from new incoming students – it's really hard to get on with British students.*" show the inequity between international students and their hosts.



### 9.3.3 Investing

*Investing* is the label given to another property in *Making the grade* which describes how international students, over a period of time, begin to come to terms with their situation, become more aware of the changes that need to be made to succeed in their endeavours and invest in themselves by pushing themselves to gain the skills they need. *Investing* describes how students work hard to improve themselves, literally investing time and effort in gaining the knowledge and skills that they have realised they want and need to have to be successful in their studies and beyond. This investment follows the realisation of the task that they face as international students, as presented in the *The challenge*, and precedes them *Gaining legitimacy* when they succeed in meeting those challenges. *Investing* signals the stage of the international student journey when students understand what is required of them and invest in themselves. As they do so, they gain confidence and make the required changes to *Make the grade*. When Bolin said ‘*I can learn to correct my drawbacks*’ he has firstly become aware of his weaknesses, and then at the stage of *Investing* he starts to address them. When Kevin said: ‘*Getting better, step by step. It’s like ...becoming a better student! I learnt what I need to do,*’ he showed he was ready and willing to make his investment.

This notion of international students *Investing* in their skills in order to become successful is echoed in Norton-Pierce’s (1995) concept of language learners’ investment in their language learning, which itself builds on Bourdieu’s analogies of capital. In *Being ignored* the metaphor of social capital was used to explain why L1 English students may ignore international students and here capital theory is referred to again, this time in regard to the value of linguistic

capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) (Bourdieu, 1991). The value of language is considered to be one of the most important assets for Bourdieu: 'the influence of linguistic capital...never ceases to be felt: style is always taken into account, implicitly or explicitly, at every level of the education system and, to a varying extent, in all university careers' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p. 73). In his original discussion he focused on class, concluding that the class whose language differed most of all from the accepted scholarly language would have a higher educational mortality rate. One might expect such a mortality rate with students having English as a second language.

Norton (2000) considers that language learners moving into a new community would expect to broaden their symbolic and material resources and consequently their cultural capital through learning the target language.

Bourdieu therefore also views identity as a process rather than fixed. An individual's capital can change drastically as they change location and situation and the difficulty that international students have in meeting local people and forming meaningful relationships can be explained through Bourdieu's metaphors of capital. When international students invest in their skills and their language learning, they are investing in themselves, with a view to gaining worthwhile capital in the future and this investment involves identity change. For these reasons *Investing* is presented as a property of *Making the grade*.

These theories of identity and investment explain much of the data gathered in this project, especially the paradox that international students say they want to improve their English skills, yet continue to socialise with other non-English speakers: '*All Chinese students in the same group. It's just like being in China*' (Alice). International students' failure to exploit what appear to the outsider to be

good language learning opportunities is explained by the lack of the right to speak. As Chong puts it:

*“Simply by physically being in a ‘native speaker country’ does not mean that learners have the choice of participating in their chosen target language communities. And when they do, they do not always gain instant acceptance or respect. The simplistic view that if learners are motivated enough, they would find target language speakers to practice the language with is not only misguided, but possibly damaging. This only highlights the short-sightedness of those who have not had the experience of being someone who does not hold any cultural or social capital, and therefore not given the right of speech in a given community.”* (Chong, 2012)

This brings us to the last property of international students’ identity change in which they gain their legitimacy.

#### **9.3.4 Gaining legitimacy**

The term *Gaining legitimacy* is the final step that international students take as they *Make the grade* and succeed in their studies. It describes how students *gain legitimacy* both privately and publically as they formally succeed and gain the recognition that they have craved. *Gaining legitimacy* includes students coming to terms with their English language skills, taking their legitimate places in the student community, and gaining equality with home students. When Frank commented: *‘I can’t wait for the graduation day. I will throw my hat in the air and everyone will see me. I will be like all the others.’* he showed his desire to become a legitimate member of the graduating group.

The concept of *Gaining legitimacy* emerged from the data and is supported in Lave and Wenger’s literature in their discussion of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) which describes a process of identity change as learners move from being newcomers on the periphery of a social community to full participation. The learner is seen here as

participating more and more in the community so learning takes place through relationships with other people and includes identity change. Identity plays an important role in community of practice theory and in that of legitimate peripheral participation. Entry to the community of practice depends on an individual's legitimate identity to be there and lacking legitimate identity may prevent potential learners from joining potentially beneficial communities. This grounded theory proposes that at the start of their sojourn in the UK international students are not considered as legitimate members of local communities because they lack the language skills, sociocultural skills and academic skills that community members are supposed to possess. Their stay in the UK is a process of gaining those skills, and moving towards becoming legitimate community members.

This process should therefore be considered as a process of building an identity, which 'consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities' (Wenger, 1998, p. 145). Wenger is clear about the changing nature of identity. Identity is a learning trajectory, and he claims that we are defined by where we have been and where we are going. Identity here is something that is always going on, constantly negotiated, fundamentally temporal. Learning, labelled as *Making the grade* in this study, is therefore basically a process of identity change with the learner on a trajectory. Wenger claims that individuals have a sense of this trajectory – they understand their advancement and progress and this is supported by data collected in this project. For our international students the trajectory is towards the award of their degree and they can judge their progress towards their goal through the events on their trajectory – such events may be passing important milestone assessments that they meet along the way. Ultimately, according to community

of practice theory, learning is the negotiation of an identity and the process of becoming a certain person. Mahmud's comments about his identity change are a window to this process:

*"..Talk a little. Get more confident. Then talk more to everybody. Got better at talking, no actually better at meeting people. Like a new person!.."*

Reaching a point where they are more confident with their English language skills is an important aspect of *Gaining legitimacy*. Before international students reach this point, they are locked out of the valuable English speaking communities which offer the rich language learning opportunities they need, and, as has been shown, are denied the right to speak. As students gain legitimacy they gain their right to speak. This 'right to speak' should be considered as an aspect of an individual's capital:

*"A person speaks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished...Competence implies the power to impose reception...those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen and those who listen regard those who speak as worthy to speak."*

(Bourdieu, 1977, p. 648)

Norton-Pierce (1995) considers the 'right to speak' to be an integral part of communicative competence, the argument being that if speakers do not consider themselves as 'legitimate' English speakers then they will not claim their right to speak. Norton (1995) claims that immigrants may not conceive of themselves as 'legitimate' English speakers and that is what explains their silence. Over time, as their identity changes, from immigrant to citizen they gain the power to impose reception, and this gives them communicative

competence. In this way, becoming communicatively competent is a process of gaining power and taking one's rightful place in a community. This is the same process that international students go through in the UK. When they *make the grade* they gain legitimacy and are given, and take, the right to speak.

#### **9.4 Conclusion to Making the grade**

Data from international students in this study, when combined with the further data from literature, suggests that international students have multiple, changing identities which continue to evolve as they learn during their sojourn in the UK. It was found that *Investing* was a useful concept to explain how students found out which skills they needed to improve and worked on them, a process which contributed to further identity change. Students' desire for recognition of their achievements was labelled *Gaining legitimacy*, a term also applicable to how international students become legitimate English language users and how they gain the right to speak in the English speaking community.

However, it should not be concluded that international students successfully join the target language community. Data did not show any real meaningful level of integration between international students and the L1 English speakers that they *Reach out* to. But data does show that as international students gain confidence and gain sociolinguistic skills they interact more successfully with L1 English speakers, which feeds into their process of identity change.

# Chapter Ten: Conclusions and recommendations

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## 10.1 Introduction

The aims of this study were firstly to discover the main areas of concerns for international students, secondly to explore the strategies they employed to tackle those concerns, and thirdly to make recommendations in the light of my findings. I achieved the first two aims by interviewing eighteen international students and, following the systematic process of grounded theory methodology, I generated a grounded theory to explain the data that I collected. I achieved my third aim in the latter stages of my study by carefully re-examining my findings and discussion sections and identifying areas where I considered stakeholders involved in HE international student education could improve their practice.

This final chapter concludes my research by summarising the grounded theory I discovered, the main concerns of international students and the responses they make to those concerns. This chapter also outlines the contribution of this research to the study of the international student experience and makes a number of recommendations.

## 10.2 Conclusions

This grounded theory claims that one of the main concerns for international students is their English language proficiency and concludes that competence in English language plays a fundamental role in international students' self-confidence. Such students consider themselves to be at a distinct disadvantage

compared to home students because of having to study in their L2. The research suggests that students may overestimate this disadvantage of studying in their L2 and underestimate other disadvantages which are harder to identify, such as differences in educational culture. ESL students often fall back on their L1 skills to support them in their study, making use of subject content accessed in their L1. The practice of studying and writing content in the L1 and the use of translation and translation tools seem widespread although students seem to consider these as poor academic practices. The research emphasises the crucial importance of language in building an individual's self-esteem: without the linguistic competence to interact comfortably in the target language an individual feels foolish and excluded from the society around them. However, as that competence grows so does their self-confidence.

Another main concern for international students is their feelings of exclusion from the host society: they feel like they are *outsiders*. My research showed that international students perceive that their home culture, and the skills that they bring with them, are not valued when they come to study in the UK. My grounded theory shows that ESL students believe that they reach out to their new British peers but they are ignored and that they deal with that rejection by relying on friendships with people from their home country, or with similar backgrounds to themselves. Theories of social and cultural capital were shown to have particular relevance to international students because they explain why individuals who are successful at home suddenly find themselves weak and dispossessed when they move to a new environment.

Although the two issues above have emerged as the main concerns for international students, there are a myriad of other challenges that they face in



their social and academic lives every day because of wide cultural differences between their home environment and the UK. This grounded theory claims that international students feel overwhelmed with the challenge that they face and that this feeling may be an important step in the psychological process of acculturation. ESL students need to work hard to bridge the gap between their academic and sociocultural skills and those that are required to be successful in Britain. They feel that they need to catch up, even though this may not actually be the case, and they feel daunted when they realise the size of the challenge they face.

One of the main strategies that international students employ in response to their challenges is to rely on other international students to support them in their daily lives. They survive together, offering each other a supportive social network and resources that are exploited to meet everyday subsistence needs. They study together, offering advice and sharing their knowledge and skills. They struggle together because sometimes their shared knowledge and skills provide poor quality guidance. This research concludes that the support network that international students provide for each other constitutes a community of practice and the literature relating to communities of practice has been particularly useful in helping to understand the nature of international students' networks of mutual support. This support has been shown to be of vital importance to international students.

According to this grounded theory, international students' main psychological response to the challenges that they need to overcome is to engage in a long term process of identity change. This is closely bound up with their acquisition of the language skills and other skills that they need to learn in order to

succeed. The change reflects the multiple nature of sojourners' identities. The students invest in their learning and when they succeed they gain the legitimacy which is so important to them. This identity change theory and its properties of shifting identities, investing and gaining legitimacy emerged as a result of weaving literature on identity, investment and language learning into my results to produce a grounded theory which explains how and why international students change as they live and study in the UK.

### **10.3 The overall contribution of this study and suggestions for further research**

This study has added to the body of literature on the international student experience with unique comments from research participant and such contributions increase the total amount of data available for all researchers to draw on. My innovative use of a grounded theory approach to researching the international student experience has pulled together research and literature in the related fields of the student experience, second language learning, acculturation, communities of practice, social capital and identity theory to offer a comprehensive grounded theory on the challenges international students face and how they tackle those challenges.

This research also contributes to our understanding of the study practices of international students. It has been discovered that international students make considerable use of their first language in their study and the effect this may have on their studies would be of considerable interest to international educators. The practice of carrying out background reading in an international student's L1 is virtually unmentioned in the literature however in this study it is referred to frequently. It should be a matter of concern to investigate how

widespread the practice is, and what the effect of reading in L1 rather than English is on students in terms of their language improvement and their academic success. Similarly, students' use of other translation strategies and tools (such as use of the online *Google translate* tool) are likely to provide interesting and fruitful areas for further research.

The research participants in this study came from China, Malaysia, Thailand, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Statistics show (see Table 1) that other countries also provide considerable numbers of international students for UK HEIs, notably India, Pakistan and Nigeria. Given the importance of these nationalities for the UK HE market and the need to support all international students, similar studies including these nationalities would be advantageous to discover issues which may be particular to students of those nationalities.

The research participants in this study were Masters and MPhil/PhD students. Given that undergraduate students are usually younger and less academically experienced than postgraduate students, further studies which focus on undergraduates may uncover new experiences and strategies not yet revealed.

It would also be useful to carry out research on international students whose studies were less successful than those of the participants in this study.

Although some of my research participants were still in the early stages of their academic sojourn, they generally felt that they were on the path to academic success and their narratives were full of stories of how they had risen to the challenges they faced. This situation reflects how I recruited willing volunteers for my research and this recruitment strategy would have had an impact on the profile of my participants. Research which tried to tell the stories of students who were struggling with their studies or who had been unsuccessful in their

studies (those who had not *made the grade*) would reveal yet more of the international student experience.

#### **10.4 Study limitations**

Although I claim to have contributed to the body of knowledge on the international student experience, it is important to understand the limitations and weaknesses of my research.

Firstly, this study has been carried out by one part-time researcher with lecturing and management responsibilities. Whilst the on-going non-research activities have contributed to my valuable background knowledge and experience in regard to international students, they have also considerably reduced the amount of time available for PhD study. As a novice grounded theory researcher I have struggled to make sense of my data and it is very likely that a full-time experienced researcher would produce a more detailed, wider and more comprehensive grounded theory.

The potential bias of the researcher also needs to be acknowledged. Despite my attempts to shed my biases and preconceptions (as discussed in the Methodology chapter) this study involves a middle-class, white, male, British, native English speaker interpreting data from research participants from radically different cultures speaking in their second language. Section 3.6.3 discussed some of the challenges of cross-cultural interviewing and although I took steps to counter this, I remain conscious of the possibility of the misinterpretation of data.

Another limitation to my study is to recognise that the research was carried out in a single educational institution. The location, history, subject specialisms,

international links, recruitment strategy, ranking, and entry requirements of my university make the research context unique and we must be wary about extending findings outside this particular context.

## **10.5 Recommendations**

A number of practice implications emerge from this study. Universities which recruit and host international students and which have been shown to rely on international student fees for an important part of their income clearly have the biggest role to play in improving the international student experience and the majority of recommendations made here apply to them. Some recommendations also apply to other stakeholders involved with and with interests in HE international student education in the UK.

### **10.5.1 Recommendation One**

Universities need to address the issue of international students' English language proficiency because this has a serious impact on their student experience. Institutions could begin to address this issue by carrying out more research into the role that English language proficiency plays in academic achievement and ESL students' social lives so that they can implement evidence –based recruitment, teaching and support practices. As discussed in chapter five, research into this area has produced mixed results which may reflect the many small scale research projects undertaken. Given the financial benefits that universities accrue from international students, it is reasonable to expect institutions which are specialists in research to fund and carry out more large-scale research projects to improve our awareness of the link between English language proficiency and ultimate academic achievement. It is likely that such projects would lead to more widespread common practice and firmer

guidelines in regard to the recruitment of international students and English language support provision for those students. Given the size and extent of some language proficiency testing operations (2,000,000 IELTS tests were taken between May 2013 and May 2014 in 900 centres around the world (IELTS, 2014)) we should expect to see companies with interests in this area working closely with universities. Such research, feeding into a review of English language requirements at university and providing a firmer base of knowledge in this field, would improve the confidence that international students have in themselves and the confidence that all university staff and students have in hosting international students in our HE institutions. There is evidence that universities in English-speaking countries are under pressure to lower their entry scores in English language to attract more international students (O'Loughlin, 2008) and it is essential that they resist such pressure when international students who have been admitted at the current levels feel that they are struggling with their level of English.

### **10.5.2 Recommendation Two**

International students should receive explicit instruction on the value of carrying out their study in English because of the benefits they will gain in language and academic literacy development, and should receive guidance on avoiding poor practice. A look at popular courses designed for pre-sessional courses to prepare ESL students to study at university in the UK (de Chazal and McCarter, 2012; Hewings, 2012; Phillips and Phillips, 2012) address some poor practice of students which needs to be improved such as plagiarism, but there is no recognition of the poor practice uncovered in this study of over-use of the first language, and of translation strategies. Explicit discussion of these poor

practices should take place in the classroom and be taken up by tutors and lecturers working in British HE and by materials writers and publishers who produce study materials for ESL students. This recommendation that students need to understand the value of studying in English carries the caveat that lecturers should also be aware of the potential value of L1 use in reinforcing subject content and building students' cultural and social capital.

### **10.5.3 Recommendation Three**

International students should also be offered more instruction in everyday colloquial English in order to improve their communicative competence so they feel more able and confident to interact with native English speakers. The best way to improve the linguistic competence that they need to flourish is for international students to interact with native English speakers as much as possible. However this research has shown that achieving this interaction is difficult, and for this reason explicit instruction which focuses on improving the ability to interact with native speakers in informal situations has an important role to play. Alongside this instruction in colloquial English, international students also need continued instruction in the academic genre of English which is required of them in their studies. When every international student considers that their language skills are insufficient and that they are at a disadvantage they need to know that their concerns matter to the university and they are being addressed.

### **10.5.4 Recommendation Four**

Universities which recruit international students also need to work harder to increase contact between international students and home students in meaningful ways so that international students feel welcomed into the whole

student body. The negative impact on international students of failing to be welcomed in such a manner is severe and causes loss of self-esteem which makes it even harder for international students to break down the barriers between the different cultural and national groupings in the university environment. Research in this study and in the literature reviewed shows that despite the potential for rewarding multicultural experiences to take place on university campuses, the reality is that such experiences tend to remain as potentialities. It is not realistic to expect students, home or international, to lead this move towards greater contact. It is clearly the responsibility of the recruiting university to maximise contacts between different student groups and it is not hard to imagine a number of ways such contact could be promoted: through buddy schemes; through greater funding and promotion of intercultural clubs and societies; through innovative coursework assessments based on working with students from different cultures. This last suggestion offers a number of very positive benefits to home and international students: if international students can be placed on an equal footing with home students because their language, skills and knowledge are shown to have value then we can expect rewarding experiences to follow.

#### **10.5.5 Recommendation Five**

UK HE institutions need to respond to international students' difficulties in engaging with a new academic culture with more explicit teaching of the nature of the UK HE environment and what is expected of students who study in it. When '80% of Chinese students say "what do lecturers want?"' (Feng) clearly they have not been adequately prepared to deliver what the lecturers are looking for. Instruction should include what constitutes good and bad practice



and the qualities and features that are expected to be present in student coursework and examination answers. Extensive use of exemplars of successful student work should be encouraged in order to make it as easy as possible for international students to understand what is wanted from them.

#### **10.5.6 Recommendation Six**

Universities need to explore as many ways as possible for students to actively retain their home culture as well as being encouraged to engage with the host culture. This project has demonstrated that students adapt to the UK most successfully when they have reaffirmed their home culture whilst accepting that of the UK. Language exchange opportunities offer excellent opportunities for international students to build confidence in their second language whilst gaining the important recognition for the cultural and linguistic capital that they bring with them from home. UK universities should promote such language exchange opportunities wherever possible and explore ways to reward home students for taking up foreign language learning opportunities and encourage international students to explore opportunities in teaching their first language. Another opportunity for international students to engage with their home culture and build capital in their new environment is for them to participate more in promoting cultural events in universities. The university in this study held a Chinese New Year celebration which failed to impress the Chinese students because the food was not up to the required standard or the expected variety, which suggests that the celebration was done *for* the Chinese, rather than *by* the Chinese, which reflects their *Being outsiders*. If international students can take ownership of such events there are likely to be many benefits for those involved.

### **10.5.7 Recommendation Seven**

UK universities need to take positive steps to challenge the 'deficit view' of international students. Chapter seven showed the prevalence of this standpoint in the minds of lecturers, home students and even international students themselves. There needs to be a focus on supporting international students to adapt to the UK HE system through highlighting differences between systems, rather than focusing on weaknesses. At the same time institutions need to explore ways of raising home staff and students' awareness of international students' strengths to challenge the negative view of their skills, abilities and knowledge. In regard to university lecturers, more training and awareness raising of different education systems and challenging of stereotyping of students is required. It is shown that many lecturers hold the 'deficit model' of international students which is unlikely to be helpful in addressing their needs and is likely to contribute to their feelings of inadequacy.

### **10.5.8 Recommendation Eight**

UK universities, recruitment agencies and partner institutions abroad whose links provide pathways for international students to study in the UK should collaborate more to offer support not only for students in the UK but for *potential* international students. This study recognises that an important step in students' adaption to the UK is their realisation of the changes and improvements that they need to make and so it is recommended here that stakeholders involved in international student education do more to raise students' awareness of the challenges of studying in the UK. Support is needed before the decision to study abroad has been made so that students can make well-informed decisions about whether studying abroad is appropriate for them. Let us not

forget Miriam's: "*Think before you come! It might not be the right thing if you cannot manage yourself...*" International students require an understanding of the difficulties involved in living and studying in the UK before they arrive in order to help them prepare for such challenges.

### **10.5.9 Recommendation Nine**

Universities also need to review their counselling services to ensure that they have adequately trained and specialist counsellors who can offer appropriate support to international students whose experiences at UK universities can be particularly challenging. The process of adjustment and identity change that international students undergo can be a painful and confusing one and supporting students through it should be a priority. Universities should consider how best to do the following: train staff and students to understand this process of personal change; provide trained counselling staff for students to interact with; train experienced international students to become peer counsellors so that they can support fellow students through the process. All these counsellors will need to encourage international students to understand their learning journey and their trajectory. Students need to be shown how successful students managed their trajectories and be shown stories of successful students who moved through the process of identity change that learning is. Although international students support each other during their sojourn in the UK, it is not clear how explicitly students who are coming to the end of their sojourn relate their experiences of their journey to potential newcomers and universities could do more to set up opportunities for such experience sharing. This would provide newcomers, who are overwhelmed with *The Challenge*, to better understand the process of adaptation they are involved in and encourage

them to invest in that process to emerge as successful students. Maggie's comment '*After talking all night with my new friend I was so happy. So relieved. To find that it wasn't only me! I thought I was the only one. I thought I was no good. But that's not right! I'm OK! I'm OK!*' shows the value of peer support: if Maggie had had a similar conversation earlier on then her path might have been less painful.

#### **10.5.10 Recommendation Ten**

Universities also need to find ways of ensuring that good practice, rather than poor practice, is shared within international students' communities. We have learnt through this research that international students rely on support from each other so much that they will follow advice from friends in their network even if it conflicts with expert advice from university academics. There is currently growing interest in peer-assisted learning schemes in the UK HE (Ody and Carey, 2012) and it is recommended here that such schemes could play an important role in ensuring good practice is shared in international students' communities. Another issue that universities need to take on board is the issue of breaking down barriers between communities of practice which the research has shown can be difficult, especially because of the lack of trust and understanding between these communities. Universities clearly need to explore ways of promoting activities which bring members of different communities together both inside and outside the classroom. The example of language exchange opportunities has been mentioned previously and is raised again here as an example of potential valuable peer interaction between members of different groups.

### **10.5.11 Recommendation Eleven**

The British government and British universities also need to review their practices in regard to the tracking of international students as they go about their legal lives in the UK. This research has demonstrated how uncomfortable students feel as their attendance is monitored and this contributes to their feeling of alienation. At the time of writing increasing focus is being paid by the British government to control net migration into the UK and, despite pressure from universities, international students are included in that measure. This has meant greater scrutiny of international students, their qualifications and their visas in a crackdown on 'bogus' students and institutions who recruit them. There are voices claiming that this hostile approach to international students is damaging the recruitment efforts of universities bringing international students into the UK and has psychological effects on genuine international students too (Mercer, 2014). Most recent figures do indeed show that the total number of international students starting HE courses in the UK has levelled off in the past two years and even started to fall (Universities UK, 2014). Whilst it is important to stop the abuse of the UK visa system, the government needs to find ways of doing so without alienating international students to the extent where they feel criminalised.

### **10.6 Future study**

This thesis concludes by considering the future area of study which I am drawn towards after this research. When I began this research project I expected my research to focus mainly on language: the importance of English and how international students improved (or did not) improve their English language skills during their sojourn in the UK. But adopting grounded theory as a

methodology meant giving control of my area of research to my research participants and I did this willingly with a genuine interest in where this would lead. The result is that I have explored concepts of identity and learning which were new to me and which have greatly enhanced my understanding of the overall international student experience.

When I now consider my own international students and their English language progress it is clear to me that the big issues do not lie within my English language classroom, but outside it in the wider environment. Without cultural or social capital my students are not given the right to speak, and consequently the task of language learning becomes immeasurably harder and less attractive. The result is that I feel inexorably drawn to engage in further research into *how* international students' lack of cultural and social capital can be addressed so that their student experience can be improved and we can turn the potential benefits of multicultural university campuses into a reality.



## Appendix A: Ethical Approval Form

<p><b>PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY</b> <b>PLYMOUTH BUSINESS SCHOOL</b> <b>PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY COLLEGES FACULTY</b> <b>Faculty Research Ethical Approval Committee (FREAC)</b> <b>APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL OF RESEARCH</b></p>	
<p><b>ALL PARTS OF THIS FORM MUST BE COMPLETED IN FULL IN ORDER TO GAIN APPROVAL</b></p>	
<p><b>Title of Research:</b>    <b>International students and their communities of practice</b></p>	
<p><b>1.</b></p>	<p><b>Nature of Approval Sought (please tick relevant box)</b></p> <p>(a) PROJECT*:    <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>    (b) PROGRAMME*:    <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p><i>If (a) then please indicate which category:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Funded Research Project    <input type="checkbox"/></li><li>• MPhil/PhD Project    <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></li><li>• Other (please specify):    <input type="checkbox"/></li></ul> <p><i>*Note: In most cases, approval should be sought individually for each project. Programme approval is granted for research which comprises an ongoing set of studies or investigations utilising the same methods and methodology and where the precise number and timing of such studies cannot be specified in advance. Such approval is normally appropriate only for ongoing, and typically unfunded, scholarly research activity.</i></p>
<p><b>2.</b></p>	<p><b>Investigators/Supervisors</b></p> <p>Name, Contact Address and Telephone Number:</p>



	<p>Patrick McMahon</p> <p>Cookworthy building</p> <p><a href="mailto:patrick.mcmahon@plymouth.ac.uk">patrick.mcmahon@plymouth.ac.uk</a></p> <p>extension 85627</p> <p>Director of Studies/Other Supervisors:</p> <p>(only where Principal Investigator is a postgraduate student)</p> <p>First supervisor: Dr Pedro Guijarro-Fuentes, School of Tourism and Hospitality, PU</p> <p>Second supervisor: Dr Michaela Gummerum, School of Psychology, PU</p> <p><i>Please indicate department of each named individual, including collaborators external to the faculty.</i></p> <p><i>*Note: Principal Investigators are responsible for ensuring that all staff employed on projects (including research assistants, technicians and clerical staff) act in accordance with the University's ethical principles, the design of the research described in this proposal and any conditions attached to its approval.</i></p>
3.	<p><b>Funding Body (if any), Amount of Funding (if any) and Duration of Project/Programme with Dates*:</b></p> <p><b>The International Centre (which is my school as I work in the English Language Centre) is paying the part time fees for my PhD research study which are £2300 per year. I intend to start on the research phase of my study in the autumn term 2012 and I would like approval for a three year study. (My first enrolment date was April 2011 and I haven't done any research yet.)</b></p> <p><i>*Approval is granted for the duration of projects or for a maximum of three years in the case of programmes. Further approval is necessary for any extension of programmes.</i></p>
4.	<p><b>Aims and Objectives of Research Project/Programme:</b></p>

	<p>Aims: the two main aims of the research project are to investigate the nature and extent of international students' communities of practice and to discover what study practices international students employ and share with each other.</p> <p>Objectives: My objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To interview international students about their social and academic networks</li> <li>• To interview international students about their academic practices and how they share these practices with other students</li> <li>• To analyse the interview data and draw conclusions about students' communities of practice and their shared academic practices</li> <li>• To make recommendations in regard to the academic support of international students in the light of my findings</li> </ul>
5.	<p><b>Brief Description of Research Methods and Procedures:</b></p> <p>I will interview international students from the international student body at Plymouth University. The population is students who have English as a second language and who usually reside outside of the UK. Students will be recruited using notices on noticeboards and through the Plymouth University international e mail list.</p> <p>Students will be interviewed and the data will be open-coded as it is collected through open-ended interviews using grounded theory as the research design. Data will be uploaded to Nvivo9 where further analysis will yield themes and categories. Memos will be made throughout the process to track the development of theories arising from the data. Due to the grounded theory approach the exact number of interviewees is not known: once data ceases to give rise to new categories then students will no longer be interviewed.</p> <p><i>Specify subject populations and recruitment method. Please indicate also any ethically sensitive aspects of the methods. Continue on attached sheets if required.</i></p>
6.	<p><b>Ethical Protocol:</b></p> <p>I will ensure that my research meets Plymouth University's principles for</p>

	<p>research involving human participants by addressing each of the issues set out below.</p> <p>Please indicate how you will ensure this research conforms with each clause of the University of Plymouth's <i>Principles for Research Involving Human Participants</i>. Please attach a statement which addresses each of the ethical principles set out below.</p>
(a)	<p>Informed Consent:</p> <p>I will inform potential participants in my research about the features of the research when I openly recruit for participants through notices on noticeboards and through open e mails. Individual students will not be approached to take part in the study. The features that will be made clear are that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students do not have to take part in this research and it is not part of their study in any way. I will ensure this is understood by explicitly saying so on notices and emails which I use for recruiting volunteers. I will not promote the research in lectures or tutorials and I will rely on students responding voluntarily to my open written requests outside formal study sessions. The notices and emails will not be addressed to individuals or appear through module email lists of TULIP sites.</li> <li>• I will interview participants about their social and academic networks and about their study practices</li> <li>• I might ask them for a follow up interview or an interview at a later date but they may choose not to do this</li> <li>• Interviews will last about 45 minutes</li> <li>• I will record the interviews so I can listen to them again later</li> <li>• They can change their minds later if they want about taking part in the research and I will not use their interview data</li> <li>• I will ask them to sign a consent form giving me permission to use their interview data at the time of the interview</li> </ul>
(b)	<p>Openness and Honesty:</p> <p>I will be open and honest at all times and no deception is required.</p>

	<p><i>Note that deception is permissible only where it can be shown that all three conditions specified in Section 2 of the University of Plymouth's Ethical Principles have been made in full. Proposers are required to provide a detailed justification and to supply the names of two independent assessors whom the Sub-Committee can approach for advice.</i></p>
(c)	<p>Right to Withdraw:</p> <p>When I interview students they will be given an information form telling them how they can withdraw from the research. They will be able to contact me by email (or in person) and request to withdraw from the research and I will destroy data provided by them. They will be informed that they will be able to withdraw up to March 2014 when I intend to start analysing the data.</p> <p><i>Note that this section should also clarify that participant's data will be destroyed should they withdraw, in accordance with best practice.</i></p>
(d)	<p>Protection From Harm:</p> <p>Participants will not be in any physical danger during the research process. If the process of research reveals psychological distress then I will be obliged to make recommendations to remedy the situation and these are likely to include referring a student to the student welfare service.</p> <p>Students will be asked to express a preference for the location of the interviews which will be a neutral venue on campus.</p>
(e)	<p>Debriefing:</p> <p>The participants will be informed about the purpose of the study and its procedures when they volunteer and respond to the initial notice asking for volunteers and again at the time of the interviews.</p>
(f)	<p>Confidentiality:</p> <p>I will guarantee confidentiality of the participants' identity in my research. Their real names will not be used in the recording of the data, its uploading to</p>

	Nvivo, its analysis and its writing up in the final report.		
(g)	<p>Professional Bodies Whose Ethical Policies Apply to this Research:</p> <p>I have consulted the Ethical Guidelines from the Social Research Association which are the most appropriate for this study and I undertake to adhere to these guidelines.</p> <p><i>The committee strongly recommends that prior to application, applicants consult an appropriate professional code of ethics regardless of whether or not they are members of that body (for example, Social Research Association . <a href="http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethical.htm">http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethical.htm</a> Market Research Society <a href="http://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/codeconduct.htm">http://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/codeconduct.htm</a> British Sociological Association <a href="http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/">http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/</a>). Applicants <b>MAY</b> choose to write "not applicable" in the "Relevant Professional Bodies" section of the Ethical Application Form. However, it is very rare that there would be no professional/academic code of ethics relevant to a given research project. If based on the information written in other sections of the form, FREC considers a particular professional code to be of relevance, then the Committee may make its consultation and adherence a condition of acceptance.</i></p>		
<b>7.</b>	<b>Declaration*:</b>		
	To the best of our knowledge and belief, this research conforms to the ethical principles laid down by Plymouth University and by the professional body specified in 6 (g).		
	<b>Name</b>	<b>E-mail (s)</b>	<b>Date</b>
	Principal Investigator:	Patrick McMahon patrick.mcmahon@plymouth.ac.uk	9/7/12
	Other Staff Investigators:		

	Director of Studies (only where Principal Investigator is a postgraduate student):	Dr Pedro Guijarro-Fuentes	p.guijarro-fuentes@plymouth.ac.uk	10/7/12
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Please Answer Either YES or NO to ALL Questions Below.

If you answer YES, please provide further details.

**Do You Plan To Do:**

- Research involving vulnerable groups – for example, children and young people, those with a learning disability or cognitive impairment, or individuals in a dependent or unequal relationship

**Answer: No**

- Research involving sensitive topics – for example participants’ sexual behaviour, their illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence, their abuse or exploitation, their mental health, or their gender or ethnic status

**Answer: No**

- Research involving groups where permission of a gatekeeper is normally required for initial access to members – for example, ethnic or cultural groups, native peoples or indigenous communities

**Answer: No**

- Research involving deception or which is conducted without participants’ full and informed consent at the time the study is carried out

**Answer: No**

- Research involving access to records of personal or confidential information, including genetic or other biological information, concerning identifiable individuals

**Answer: No**

- Research which would induce psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation or cause more than minimal pain

**Answer: No**

- Research involving intrusive interventions – for example, the administration of drugs or other substances, vigorous physical exercise, or techniques such as hypnotherapy. Participants would not encounter such interventions, which may cause them to reveal information which causes concern, in the course of their everyday life.

**Answer: No**

Completed Forms should be forwarded BY E-MAIL to Cher Cressey, Secretary of the FREAC at: [ccressey@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:ccressey@plymouth.ac.uk)

## **Appendix B: Interview schedule**

Initial background questions: Where are you from? How long have you been in the UK? What course are you on?

### **Opening question:**

What's it like being an international student at Plymouth University?

### **Potential questions:**

Who are your best friends here? Where are they from?

Do you have any British friends? How many/Why not? How did you meet them?

Do you feel part of the wider university and local community?

How do you find studying at university in the UK?

Is it very different to studying in your country? How?

Are there any aspects of studying you find particularly hard? Which ones? What do you do to manage?

Who do you go to when you need help with your study?

How do you feel about your level of English? Your spoken/written English levels?

Has your English improved since you came to England?

Do you actively work on improving your English? How?

What do you think about the support the university gives you? What other support should it provide?

What advice would you give to someone coming from your country to study here?



What was it like when you first came here?

How was it settling in to your new life in England? Was it easy to adapt to living in England? Why/Why not?

What are the hardest things about living and studying in England?

**Closing question:**

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about what's it like for you living and studying in the UK?

## Appendix C: Informed consent form

### Research on International Students

I have freely volunteered to answer questions about living and studying in the UK. I understand that my interview will be recorded and transcribed anonymously for research purposes.

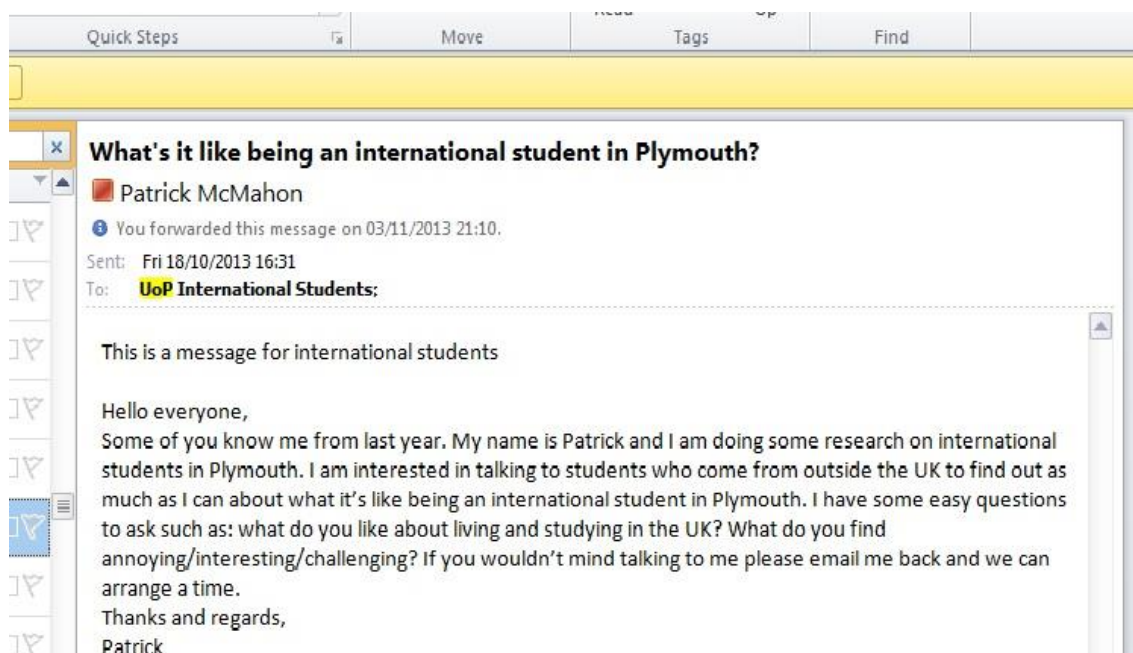
I understand that if I change my mind about participating in the research, I can contact the researcher and any data that I have contributed will be destroyed.

Name:.....

Date:.....

Signature: .....

## Appendix D: Email inviting volunteers to take part in research



## Appendix E: example of initial open coding

Do you feel comfortable about your level of English?

No I think my English isn't good enough. Just so so. I can communicate with people with just simple sentences. Just some simple things. (Not good enough for me, I need more academic English, I need more complex things.

Inadequacy of English

English is mediocre <sup>but is it? Better in reality!</sup>

Limited ability to communicate

Awareness of academic genre + need for it

So you think your English needs to be a higher level.

Reality? How good is his academic English?

Yes, and I stay here for four years and I am not satisfied with my English level.

Disappointed with progress over time

Do you think your marks aren't as high as they could be if you had better English?

Perception v. real progress. Probe in later interviews!!

Yes, I think so. Especially for higher education, language is very important. But poor English and very simple mistakes will lower my marks. So I think that's a problem.

Importance of language for university

Poor English is a hindrance

English mistakes bring marks down <sup>proof?</sup>

Awareness of obstacle <sup>or other obstacles?</sup>

Do you have friends who are doing the same course?

Yes, in my class most of the students are Chinese. I think maybe 6 or 7 are not Chinese. English

- Chinese peers

speakers are 3 or 4, the others come from other countries but most are Chinese students.

Do you help each other much?

Yes. Most of the Chinese students get together and talk about the assignments and the work and do revision for the test together. Very very few Chinese students communicate with students from other countries.

all of them?  
Chinese study together

Chinese revise together

Isolation of Chinese students

How important are your Chinese students when you study?

A source of information. Because most of the time we do assignments we need to exchange ideas. We need to ask how to do this and ask about methods and theories and how to consider the analysis so group work is very important than working alone.

True? or perception?  
What factors influences this? why do some talk to others, but some not?

Working together in a collective effort

Group is better than working individually

Even if it is an individual piece of work do you still talk a lot?

Yes even if it is individual. Because the purpose of the assignments are the same - they give us maybe some resources to use, so we find we have the same problems or mistakes. We ask how to do that, how to use which method and how to

even if asked to do it separately?

Peers share the same difficulties

do they really?  
What about individual strengths/weaknesses?  
shows collectivism?

## Appendix F: an early memo

This extract shows a memo written immediately after Miriam was interviewed and shows what I thought the most important points were that I wanted to remember.

### Miriam: her challenge

*The impression I got from Miriam's interview was the sense of struggle that she has had – of facing and overcoming a huge challenge that she hadn't expected. The struggle was a personal one. She talks about the differences in studying between China and the UK and about how that made things hard for her, about she learnt to manage everything in her life, not only her study but things like eating, clothes and accommodation. She took up the opportunity of being a Mandarin teaching assistant and she talks about how this gave her confidence in her English. She did it because she was proud of her language and heritage, but then later she realised that this helped her to survive and develop, as though it was an unconscious strategy she adopted to help adapt herself to living and studying in the UK. This reminds me of some reading I did years ago for my PGCE in EFL/ESL – the issue there was that ESL school children who received language classes in their L1 then did better in English than those who hadn't received L1 tuition. (Look this up! Might even have the book in my bookshelf!) I think the point was that people thought that they did better because they were had more confidence and self-respect (their identity had been confirmed!!) and so they were then able to learn English effectively as a L2. Miriam suffered quite bad homesickness at times. She showed lots of frustration in her lack of ability to communicate effectively with other students, British students. I think sometimes she felt a bit stupid because she had to use simple language and couldn't express difficult ideas. She said a few times about the importance of having a good level of English.*

*Most important things here: THE CHALLENGE, and how she met that by gaining confidence and then rose to that challenge.*

## **Appendix G: List of research participants**

In the following list participants' names have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

Miriam: Chinese female, early 20s, Masters student

Maggie: Thai female, late 20s, PhD student

Bolin: Chinese male, late 20s, PhD student

Adam: Malaysian male, late 20s, PhD student

Zikri: Malaysian male, late 20s, PhD student

Asma: Saudi Arabian female, late 20s, PhD student

Ahmed: Iraqi male, mid 20s, PhD student

Pang: Thai female, late 20s, PhD student

Feng: Chinese male, early 20s, Masters student

Alice: Chinese female, mid 20s, PhD student

Cuifen: Chinese female, early 20s, Masters student

Alan: Chinese male, early 20s, Masters student

Ting: Chinese female, early 20s, Masters student

Mahmud, Saudi Arabian male, mid 20s, PhD student

Frank: Chinese male, early 20s, Masters student

Badra: Saudi Arabian female, mid 20s, PhD student

Gary: Malaysian male, mid 20s, Masters student

Kevin: Chinese male, early 20s, Masters student

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