

International Student Experience Project

Unveiling the Unspoken:

A Deep Dive into the Belonging, Bridging, and Becoming



By Student Fellow Lingyi Wang

International Student Experience Project

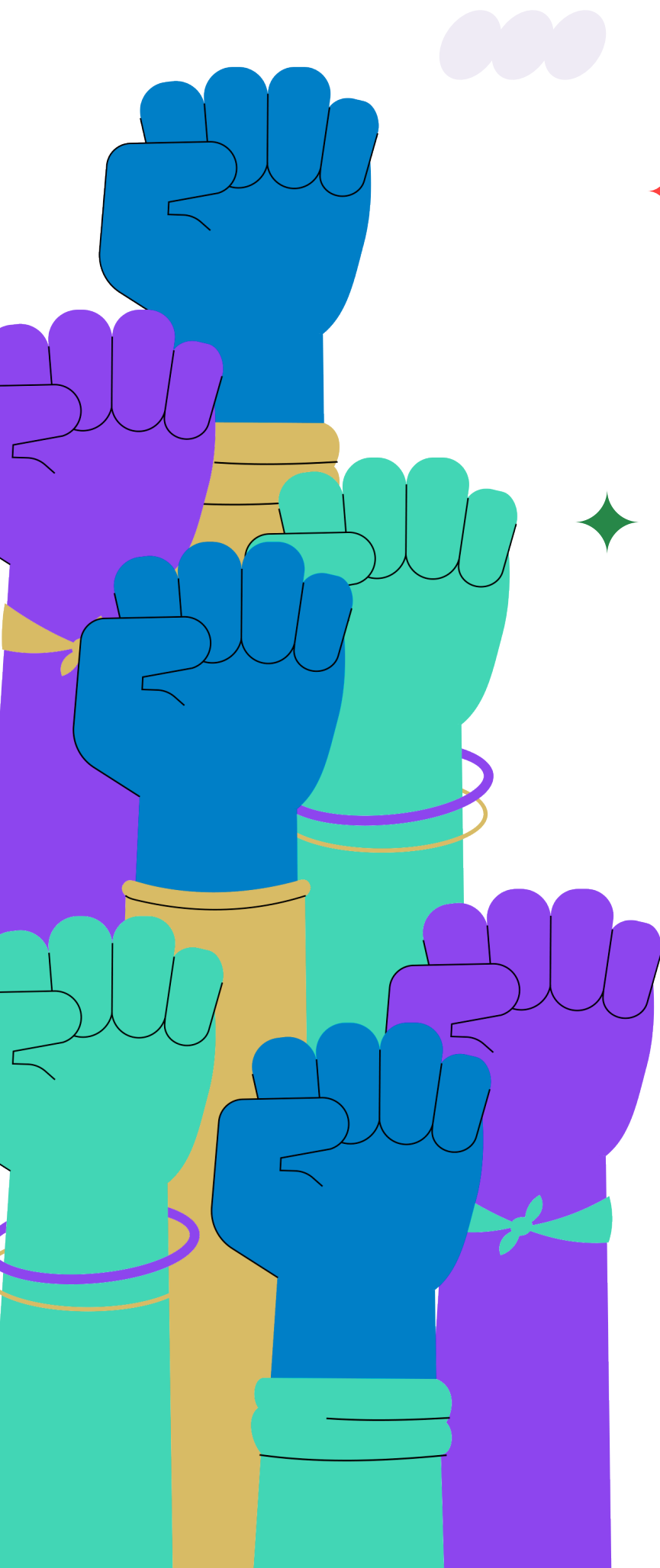
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Unveiling the Unspoken:

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pr e fa ce

As you delve into this exquisite booklet, I, Ivory Wang, a proud graduate of the University of Bristol with a BSc in Psychology in Education, am thrilled to share with you the culmination of my work as a student fellow at the Bristol Institution of Learning and Teaching. This booklet not only represents the crystallization of my efforts in this role but also serves as a reflection, deconstruction, and summary of my three-year journey as an international student.

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In my earliest blog post after taking on this role, I expressed my desire for this project to go beyond merely sharing the experiences of international students. I aimed to explore the cross-cultural understanding and communication within the international student community. It is my sincere hope that I have achieved this goal and have successfully evoked a sense of empathy for the experiences of international students, shedding light on the challenges they face, the obstacles they overcome, and the profound insights and personal growth they gain along the way. Moreover, I aspire to give voice to the unspoken thoughts and feelings that reside within the hearts of various international student groups.

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Initially, my project was incredibly ambitious in scope. However, due to objective circumstances, the research focus was significantly narrowed down to explore two primary themes in depth. As I began to articulate my research findings, I realized that discussing these themes in isolation, divorced from their broader context, would merely present lifeless results, failing to convey their true significance. To address this, I have included a third chapter, drawing from my mini social media ethnographic project, daily observations, unrecorded conversations with friends and classmates, and my own personal experiences. By incorporating a wealth of seemingly disparate details, I aim to provide a comprehensive and objective blueprint that enables readers to interpret the presented themes through a macroscopic framework that is often overlooked in academic papers.

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This booklet is not an academic report; it is a monologue, a dialogue, and a representation of many voices. My hope is that it will inspire readers to apply their own understanding and implement small changes that can enhance the experiences of international students, regardless of whether these changes have a direct academic correlation.



I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my mentors, Amy, Catriona, and Fiona, for their patient listening during my brainstorming sessions and their unwavering encouragement and support throughout the project. I am also deeply grateful to my colleagues and friends who provided invaluable feedback and meticulous reviews at every stage. The logistical and financial support from the BILT team has been instrumental in bringing this project to fruition and has afforded me the opportunity to engage with various university departments and share my findings at conferences.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the University of Bristol. Although I have grumbled about you during my three years of study, I am truly thankful for the transformative opportunity you have given me to restart and revolutionize my life on various levels, leaving my mark here.

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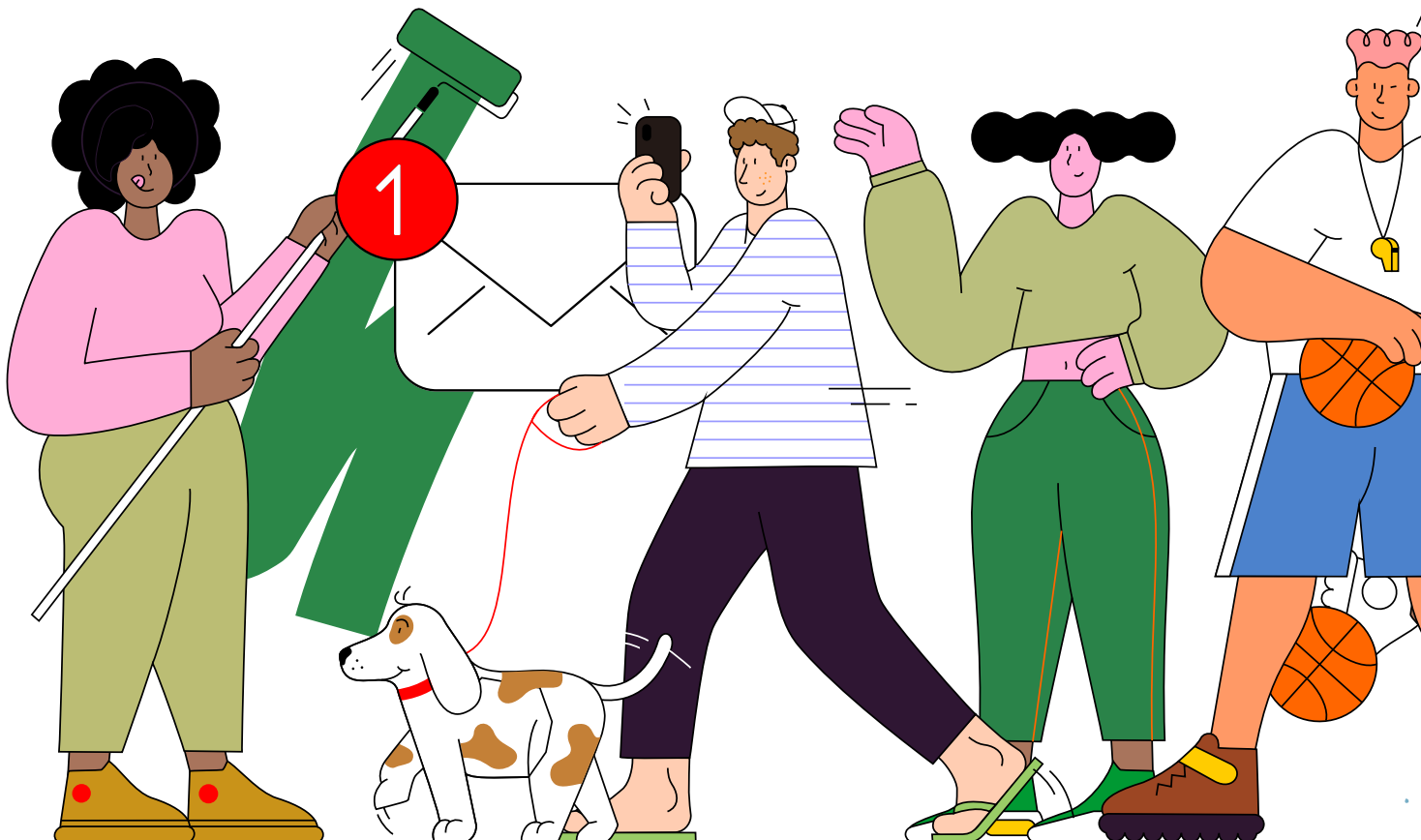
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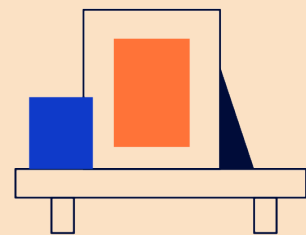


Chapter

One⁰¹

Uncharted Belonging:

Mapping the Transition Maze



Before exploring the academic experiences of international students, we must first understand the factors that may seem unrelated to academics but profoundly influence students' overall study abroad experience. The period from receiving an offer to the official start of the academic term is crucial, as it shapes students' first impressions of their new environment and largely determines how they interact with the university setting. Academic research often overlooks this stage, possibly because formal learning has not yet commenced. Every seemingly small factor—whether it's a frustrating visa interview, the anxiety of arriving in the UK without secured accommodation, or a practical meeting with a senior student—can have a butterfly effect on the student's overall adaptation process. More importantly, this period determines the student's level of adjustment and mental state at the beginning of the term, as well as how much time and energy they can directly invest in formal learning during the initial stages of the semester.

Through an in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by students during this period, such as visa applications, accommodation dilemmas, and information gaps, we discover a significant "understanding gap" between the university and international students. This gap is not only reflected in the lack of specific information but also in the misunderstandings between both parties regarding each other's needs and expectations. This "understanding gap" reflects a deeper issue: the university's limitations in fostering a sense of belonging among international students.

This chapter reveals the university's shortcomings in cultivating a sense of belonging by dissecting the various challenges international students face during the transition period. We can not only better understand why some students can quickly adjust their life rhythm and excel academically at the beginning of the term, while others feel they are falling behind after persisting for a week or two. More importantly, we can recognize many issues that have not been properly and efficiently resolved and many opportunities that have not been fully utilized.





Entry Challenges and Initial Adjustments

Belonging is a fundamental human need - the feeling of being accepted, connected, safe, loved, and supported (Frutos, 2024). It is not just a matter of physical space but also the foundation of psychological security.

"Localized belonging" refers to the emotional connection, identity, and responsibility individuals develop towards their specific environment. During orientation week, universities organize welcome activities like campus tours and club fairs to help students adapt. Student clubs and Global Lounge events, such as international food festivals and cultural exhibitions, aim to promote interaction and enhance belonging. Our focus group found most students had positive feedback on orientation week, feeling relaxed, happy, and excited for their new life. However, we must understand that invitation and welcome do not equate to fostering belonging. Belonging can result from feeling welcomed, but as SU's research shows, students felt excluded from communities outside the welcome period and missed opportunities if arriving later. Good welcome activities alone do not guarantee a strong sense of belonging.

While these activities and services are important, solely focusing on them while ignoring students' difficulties and needs during the transition period may allow early negative impacts to fester, offsetting later efforts. Cultivating belonging is reflected in seemingly trivial but crucial details of university policies and services, such as providing customized information, offering timely help in emergencies, and actively responding to issues raised. These aspects shape students' feelings about the university, determining whether they feel valued, recognized, and cared for. If the university neglects these details or responds inadequately, no amount of welcome activities can truly close the psychological distance. Next, let's discuss the three key areas for improvement identified in the focus group.

1. Entry Challenges and Culture Shock

Visa application is a headache, often consuming a significant portion of students' holidays. Students from certain countries or those studying in fields considered sensitive face longer processing times due to further investigation. Some students miss flights, incurring substantial financial losses, and arrive late, missing orientation week or even the start of term. This directly impacts their academic progress, as they waste time and energy on administrative matters instead of pre-session learning or socializing. Improving visa timelines, such as providing CAS letters (Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies, which students need to start their visa application) earlier and streamlining the application process can greatly reduce anxiety.

Moreover, entry checks make some students feel unwelcome or even discriminated against. One interviewee felt "really intimidated" and that officials thought they were "doing something wrong," calling it a "weird feeling." Another found frequent questioning at customs "weird" and "depressing," implying they didn't belong. This marginalization and unwelcome sentiment can negatively influence students' expectations of British society and the university environment.

"We worked for months to get the visa, everything. So you think that arriving here, you would be like if you have the visa, you have the, they would just look at it and say, oh, okay, that's nice. But no, they still have more questions to ask."

On a deeper level, these experiences challenge students' expectations of the UK as an open, inclusive society. As one student put it: "You are coming here because you like the country, right? And you are so enthusiastic and optimistic. And then these things happen." This discrepancy affects students' mental state and confidence in the British education system. If a country's entry policies leave such an unfriendly impression, students naturally wonder how different the university environment will be.

Although universities have limited control over this, it raises an important question: how can they compensate for the negative impressions students may develop during entry? Standard orientation activities may not suffice. Universities must actively acknowledge this issue and take steps to rebuild students' confidence and sense of belonging. As one student said: "I'm still don't feel like this is my place." This persistent "outsider" feeling extends beyond entry, permeating the entire study abroad experience. "Even if you live here for two, three years, so sometimes the things happen, for example, a bad comment about you or for example, some discrimination from the natives." It reflects a deeper problem - even in supposedly open and inclusive campus environments, students from certain countries still face subtle biases and discrimination.

Due to sensitivity, this research cannot delve further into issues of subtle bias and discrimination. However, the frequency with which these issues were mentioned across multiple conversations

is concerning. Despite the university's efforts to create a truly diverse and inclusive environment, these problems persist and seem quite prevalent. Notably, many incidents go unreported or unmentioned in university studies, regardless of the underlying reasons.

This phenomenon reflects a deeper issue: even in environments

striving for diversity and inclusivity, there are imperceptible but profound barriers. Students may choose not to report these experiences for fear of affecting their studies or social relationships, or because they believe feedback won't lead to substantive change. The university should recognize that official reports and data may not fully reflect students' true experiences.

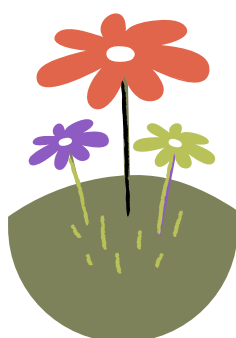
2. Accommodation dilemma

A stable living situation is crucial for establishing a sense of belonging. One student's experience illustrates this well: "For me it was very difficult because I think that if I had accommodation before I arrived, I would feel much safer arriving here. Even talking to the people in the immigration, they asked, where are you going to stay? And I had to say, I don't have an idea." Another student's story further highlights the complexity of this issue: "I couldn't get accommodation for the university because I arrived again, I fell through the cracks. I think I arrived in the middle of the semester, so there was nothing happening and I couldn't apply to anything."

Even more concerning is that students feel a lack of useful information when seeking accommodation, especially when they need to find private housing. As one student put it: "For us international students, finding private accommodation is

very difficult. It's so difficult because we don't have guarantors, and we don't know that until we start to apply for private accommodation, and everything is too late."

This reflects a disconnect between university services and students' actual needs, particularly in the process of information delivery. While the university do provide on-site housing consultancy, students often need this information before arriving on campus. One student's experience illustrates this: "I couldn't call, there was no one to call. And it's for March, which is a weird time period, but I don't know even where to search for this."



Here is an insider's list of tacit knowledge essentials to scan for the ultimate survival kit!



3. Information Gap and the Need for Tacit Knowledge

Imagine you've just set foot in a foreign country where everything is novel yet bewildering. Your university hands you a stack of materials, saying, "Welcome to the UK! Here's all the information you need." However, upon reading these materials, you find they seem to be written in another planet's language.

One student share: "Usually it's very hard for them to understand what our problems are. We need to tell them that's the thing. They think they know everything that we may ask. So they give all the answers, but they never know what we really want to know." It's like asking for directions and being told the entire city's history without learning how to get to the supermarket. This is the "curse of knowledge" in action.

The curse of knowledge refers to the difficulty of understanding the perspective of someone lacking certain information once you possess it. Simply put, once you know something, it's hard to imagine not knowing it. As one student said: "There was a lot of information being thrown at me, but they assumed that I knew a lot more than I knew about this country, the way of life here."

The university mainly provides explicit knowledge (e.g., locations, procedures), but international students may need more tacit

knowledge (e.g., cultural norms, social expectations). This difference results in information that doesn't directly address the pain point, giving a sense of relevance but not as much importance. For staff and home students, their familiarity with British lifestyle makes it challenging to grasp international students' confusion and needs. They are well-versed in British life, so they may unconsciously think, "Isn't this common sense?" But common sense differs greatly for international students. For example, one student mentioned: "I keep missing stops and buses until I find out I need to push the 'stop button' or wave at the driver."

Surely orientation week should solve these issues..., right? Well, not quite. Let's look at one student's description: "let's go to the city centre by walk or a guided tour. Or let's go to some buildings tour or the bridge. That's it." Sounds fun, doesn't it? But when you're still worrying about opening a bank account or collecting BRP (British Resident Permit) from the post office, touring bridges may not be your most pressing need. They also feel the pressure of facing various life challenges alone within a week. For them, moving house independently, adapting to a new country's policies, and handling various procedures are all very unfamiliar. Many students indicate that the information on the university website can't fully answer

their questions. It's not because the website lacks comprehensive information, but because their questions are often very specific and personalized.

Furthermore, students commonly report that when they encounter problems and email for help, reply times are long, and the responses are usually very official and uniform, typically directing them to different materials or web pages to solve problems on their own. Many students consequently feel unvalued, believing staff treat them as a case to be solved rather than a real person. This approach doesn't substantially help students and further exacerbates their helplessness. This can be explained by "cognitive biases." Staff may have an assumption bias, believing the information they provide is universally applicable and overlooking international students' unique needs. Anchoring effect can also explain the university's overreliance on initially obtained information; they may excessively depend on past experiences or feedback from

international students from a particular country, neglecting the actual needs of some groups. When handling problems, the staff may believe they already understand all of the students' issues. Students realize they need to clearly express their needs to the university but may lack effective channels or methods to do so. This deficiency makes communication and understanding between both parties even more difficult, further exacerbating the disconnect in information delivery and services.

Due to language and cultural barriers, international students may be at an information disadvantage, which the university may not fully recognize. The university may focus on solving "known unknowns" but overlook "unknown unknowns"—issues students don't even know they don't know. These unidentified needs and problems are often the biggest challenges international students face in a new environment.



Practical Solutions for Transition Challenges

Based on these three parts, our focus group participants put forward a series of practical suggestions that directly address the challenges they faced during the transition period. We have summarized the following 7 key measures:

1.

Provide training for university staff to help them recognize their cognitive biases and knowledge blind spots. Encourage staff to regularly reflect: "What might I be overlooking?"

2.

One-on-one consultation services: Provide online or offline one-on-one advisor time during the summer break, at the start of the semester, and during orientation week. This gives students the opportunity to have face-to-face contact with university staff for immediate, quick, and targeted guidance; create multi-level feedback, focusing not on asking "what do you need?" but "what don't you understand?"

3.

Emergency accommodation plan: Improve the emergency accommodation system to provide short-term accommodation, bedding, and food for new students who arrive without a place to stay or are unable to purchase food and bedding when supermarkets are closed. This timely support can greatly reduce students' stress and anxiety upon arrival.

4.

Enrich orientation week content: Expand and enrich orientation week activities, adding more practical sessions for international students, such as organizing shopping trips and hosting academic experience sharing seminars. At the same time,

move up the timing of peer mentor matching so that new students can receive peer support earlier.

5.

Social network building: Use official university platforms or emails to promote student groups from various countries, paying special attention to students from less represented countries, helping them find their communities faster. Increase their channels for obtaining information and resources through structured, constructive social activities.

6.

Improve cross-departmental collaboration: Advocate regular communication and resource sharing among different departments such as student services, housing, and academic support. Strengthen problem awareness and solution sharing, reduce various signposting behaviours, speed up problem handling, and provide more efficient services for students.

7.

Knowledge sharing platform: Establish a Wikipedia-like knowledge sharing document, which helps convert tacit knowledge (such as cultural habits, social norms, academic experiences, etc.) into explicit knowledge that is easy to understand and access; invite international students to participate in the design process of information and services.

Understanding Diverse Belonging Needs

The complexity of the sense of belonging issue largely stems from the diversity within the international student group. They come from different cultural backgrounds, have different study abroad purposes, and may have significant differences in their subjective needs, expectations, understanding, and pursuit of a sense of belonging.

Take East Asian students as an example. Their cultural context emphasizes individual attachment and obedience to the collective, and individual identity is often submerged in group identity (Cortina et al., 2017). In this context, they may not be accustomed to seeking a strong sense of belonging in school (Cortina et al., 2017). Instead, they may place more

value on emotional bonds with family and friends, i.e., the individual's sense of belonging to their own ethnic group, rather than emotional identification with the local community. Research on the sense of belonging mostly involves the relationship between students and the campus community. In the process of cultivating a sense of belonging, the relationships between students, their families, and their home communities are missing.

At the same time, the university's overemphasis on fostering a "localized" sense of belonging may be biased. For many international students, studying abroad is more like a "stay" rather than truly "staying." They may live and study in a foreign country for several years, but deep down, they always clearly recognize their "temporary" status. Many students leave the area after completing their degrees, either returning to their home countries or going elsewhere. This feeling of "no fixed abode" makes it difficult for them to develop a deep emotional attachment and sense of belonging to their environment. Practically speaking, the various possibilities of relocation also make it difficult for them to "settle down" materially, such as purchasing large items, which may deter



them. Therefore, cultivating international students' emotional connection and sense of responsibility to their university or city may not be the primary appeal and need for those who view studying abroad as a short-term "stay."

In fact, for many students, the source of belonging may not lie in where they are, but in what they are doing and with whom they are doing it. Perhaps the intellectual collision with lecturers and meeting like-minded friends are important sources of their emotional connection and self-identification. However, we don't seem to be doing very well on this point. According to SU's report, international students were all less satisfied with the number and quality of their social connections at the University than the overall results.

One interesting finding is that in the questionnaire survey, there was a question asking how the students rate what they feel when they are talking to different student groups. They more often rated their interactions with home students using somewhat negative words, such as embarrassed, nervous, and pushed off, compared to students from the same cultural background and other international students. However, when I asked similar questions in the focus group, such as "What are the attitudes and responses of local students when there are situations of not understanding?" everyone's responses were very positive, which does not match the questionnaire data. Considering the limitations of the research methods themselves and the sample size, it is difficult to say which result represents the true feedback. Alternatively, both results may be correct, but we may have missed some factors.

Unfortunately, the diversity and dynamics of the sense of belonging are not the core of this study, and the breadth of this topic could warrant a separate project for investigation. Therefore, I will stop writing about this part here.

Overall, we can see that a sense of belonging is not achieved overnight but is a dynamic construction process. It requires students to constantly adjust their self-identity and reshape their identity positioning in their interaction with the environment. The activities and resources provided by the university are certainly important, but more crucially, it is necessary to create opportunities and spaces for students to participate and experience, allowing them to gradually establish emotional connections and a sense of identity in their interactions with others, to explore, to experience, and to construct their own belonging and identity. Simply holding a few events and formulating a few policies cannot truly touch the core of belonging. We must understand that a sense of belonging is never the result of external inculcation, but a psychological experience gradually generated by individuals in their interactions with the environment and with others.

Chapter Two⁰²

Tongue-Tied in a Strange Land:

Bridging Language Proficiency



This chapter aims to explore the English proficiency levels of international students, influencing factors, and the relationship with subsequent academic English learning. By analysing students' evaluations of the importance and difficulty of the four major English skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing), as well as their English learning experiences and participation in English proficiency exams, we attempt to answer the following core questions:

- What are the focus areas of English proficiency exams? Do exam scores truly reflect students' English levels?
- What factors influence students' English proficiency exam scores?
- How do English proficiency exams and prior educational experiences affect students' subsequent academic English learning?
- How do students bridge the gap between their English abilities and actual needs, and how do they view the use of relevant tools?

Preparation for English Proficiency Tests

The Most Challenging

We found that students generally consider speaking and listening to be the most challenging English skills. As one student said: "I think I find speaking extremely important. I think I put fives for everything there because I think it's really important that the people you're talking with and conversing with understand you. I think it's just no matter if it's for academic or in relationship, but I'm finding it a bit difficult, especially here."

It is worth noting that students' evaluations of the importance of various English skills largely depend on their majors. For example, students in engineering or CS majors place relatively less overall emphasis on English skills. One student mentioned: "I can honestly say you can go through the entire program without knowing anything about English. You basically code. If all you want to do is to be a code monkey, you just sit in front of your computer and interact with a computer and don't talk with anybody else next to you, then you need zero for this (English proficiency test)." This difference among majors is also reflected in the English proficiency exam score requirements for admission to various programs. In general, the score requirements for humanities and social science majors are higher than those for science and engineering majors, and the required scores for master's programs are basically the same as, or even slightly lower than, those for undergraduate programs. Students generally believe that the current English score requirements for admission are basically reasonable, but they can be appropriately lowered for certain majors.



Influence of previous education

A student's prior educational experiences, especially during high school, significantly influence their English language development and ability to adapt to university-level studies. We found that students who completed the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme have a clear advantage in academic writing. The IB curriculum requires students to write several internal assessment reports and a 4,000-word extended essay, providing a solid foundation for academic writing. Although their overall level may not match university standards, some of their coursework covers content from the first semester of a university's freshman year (e.g., data statistics and research methods). Moreover, they already have some understanding of academic writing, enabling them to quickly grasp subsequent writing tasks. In contrast, the A-level curriculum offers less comprehensive academic writing training, and students may need more support and guidance in this area.

Beyond differences in educational systems, a student's learning stage also affects their English proficiency and needs. The disparity is particularly evident among master's students, partly

due to variations in their undergraduate education, teaching methods, and academic assessment approaches, which differ significantly from high school. One master's student mentioned, "I had never written an academic paper that met Western academic standards during my undergraduate studies. So, when I came to pursue my master's degree after completing the IELTS exam, I felt lost due to the vastly different requirements."

Comparing students' self-assessments with their prior English educational experiences reveals that those who achieved higher language scores and performed well in English proficiency tests often had more extensive English learning experiences before university, such as English summer camps and classes with native English-speaking teachers. These experiences provided opportunities to interact with native speakers but also required significant financial investments, with a few weeks of summer camp typically costing between £2,000 to £3,000. Almost all students felt that English classes within their home country's education system were very basic, and everyone could achieve relatively good English scores in their



own countries. The varying emphasis on English education in non-English-speaking countries leads to disparities in students' English foundations. One student mentioned excelling in English while studying in Country A, whereas in their hometown in Country B, the focus was on their native language, and English was not considered very important. Another student noted that due to cultural reasons, the quality of English teaching in public schools in Country C was poor.



Test Choice and Costs

When it comes to English proficiency tests, the choice of exam is a comprehensive consideration of multiple factors. International students choose which exam to take based on their individual strengths, preferences, and study destination(s). For example, IELTS has a face-to-face speaking test, while TOEFL's speaking test involves talking to a computer. Many test-takers may find face-to-face communication more natural and easier to showcase their language skills. IELTS content is more life-oriented, while TOEFL is more academic. IELTS listening and reading materials are closer to real-life scenarios, which may be easier for some test-takers to understand and handle. Many students consider multiple countries' institutions during the application process. These students tend to prefer TOEFL over IELTS (as TOEFL scores are more widely accepted than IELTS scores in North America). Some students have also taken the American SAT exam. Due to the pandemic, some students have chosen online versions of TOEFL and IELTS or the Duolingo English Test because of geographical restrictions.

For many students, the English proficiency test is their first encounter with systematic academic-style writing or reading. 80% of students have taken more than one exam, and nearly all students have attended exam-specific tutoring classes before the test. Some students chose self-study due to the high cost of tutoring classes. TOEFL and IELTS exams cost around £250 each. In China, for example, the cost of an exam tutoring class ranges from 1K to 5K per cycle. This is a significant financial expense. Students' economic conditions directly affect the number of preparation opportunities they can access (including mock exams) and the duration and quality of training.



The Gap Between Tests and Actual Needs

Understanding what they are prepared for is significantly different because it helps us know the gap between their actual English and academic levels and what is required at university. Next, we will analyse this gap from the four major language skills domains.

Reading

IELTS reading test question types mainly include fill-in-true/false, multiple-choice-blanks, choice, and matching. Although these question types vary in difficulty, they generally test the ability to quickly obtain information and understand local logical relationships. For example, true/false questions require determining whether a sentence matches the information in the text, multiple-choice questions test understanding of specific details, and matching questions focus on the correspondence between concepts. Doing well in these questions requires accurately grasping word meanings and sentence meanings and making inferences within the scope of paragraphs. However, this type of question design rarely involves sorting out the overall context of the full text, evaluating the author's viewpoints, or comparing different texts, which are higher-level thinking skills. Test-takers often read with a "problem-solving" mindset, ignoring overall reflection on the article to quickly locate answers.

The IELTS reading test has relatively high vocabulary requirements, with test-takers needing to master approximately 7,000 words to handle it with ease. This vocabulary covers multiple levels, including daily communication and academic terminology. Synonyms often appear in the exam to test students' ability to discern vocabulary and understand context. For example, in multiple-choice questions, the same concept may appear in slightly different expressions, and students need to keenly capture these subtle differences between words. However, language knowledge obtained through memorizing words and recognizing grammar rules is largely fragmented and static. Test-takers can often only recognize these knowledge points in the context of the questions and lack the ability to flexibly apply them in larger discourse. In other words, the IELTS exam focuses more on the quantity of vocabulary and grammar knowledge rather than the quality of practical application. Although this exam-oriented training mode can improve scores in the short term, it is not conducive to students forming an internal logic and thinking habits of the language. True language comprehension ability is built upon language perception and disciplinary thinking.

Writing

The IELTS writing test usually consists of two parts: chart-based writing and argumentative essay writing. The former assesses test-takers' ability to extract key points from given chart information and objectively describe and compare them. The latter requires test-takers to express personal opinions on a given topic and provide relevant arguments to support them. Although these two types of writing differ in genre, they both emphasize the ability to select, organize, and express information, which bears some similarity to parts of academic writing, such as literature reviews and argumentation.

However, there are still apparent differences in requirements and purposes. The time limit for IELTS writing (completing two essays within 150 minutes) is much shorter than the academic writing cycle, causing test-takers to focus more on the completeness of the essay rather than depth and precision. Moreover, IELTS writing mainly focuses on everyday topics and encourages test-takers to draw on personal experiences and insights, whereas academic writing requires authors to extensively read literature, objectively analyse data, and cautiously draw conclusions.

It is worth noting that the writing training students receive during the preparation phase will influence their academic writing style, and students' writing styles are also easily influenced by their tutors. Many IELTS writing tutoring emphasizes templated writing techniques, such as universal sentence patterns and fixed argumentation structures, which can easily lead students to form programmatic thinking patterns. This may cause some students to be accustomed to listing arguments without in-depth analysis and reflection, or to be keen on using specific advanced vocabulary and complex sentence structures. This may also affect the AI rate; if the vocabulary and conjunctions students habitually use in writing are very similar to the writing logic commonly used by AI, there may be a certain degree of high AI rate (this is a conclusion I drew from my personal small experiment and lacks much basis, for reference only). These exam-oriented writing habits may, to a certain extent, affect students' adaptation to the requirements of academic writing.

Based on the good academic training cases proposed by students, we have summarized two highly referential measures: also known as what I wish I could do/have when I was in Year One.





1.

Reading skills need to be closely combined with writing skills. For example, when teaching literature retrieval and reading strategies, students can be guided to extract key information from reading materials and attempt to transform it into writing

materials for literature reviews. When guiding critical reading, encourage students to evaluate the viewpoints in the literature and try to develop their own arguments in writing. This can help understand the supporting role of reading in writing.

2.

Set writing assignments related to course. For example, require students to write a brief research design or experimental plan after completing literature reading; ask them to explain the relevance of literature to a research question in the form

of annotation or critical analysis: why it is used and how it is used; ask them to analyse how articles effectively use literature to construct arguments and evidence.

3.

Mentor-based writing guidance is highly advocated. Discuss with students how to draw writing inspiration from literature, how to effectively cite and comment on literature in papers,

and how to discover gaps in research questions through literature comparison.

Crucially, these three measures need to be combined with course contents and directly learned in academic contexts or even based on students' academic writing pieces. This may explain why many students find separately offered academic writing workshops, study skills workshops or systematic teaching for a specific assignment (such as lectures on how to write a dissertation in the final year) unhelpful. We will continue to discuss this in subsequent chapters.

Listening and Speaking

The difficulties the international students encounter are mostly related to accents and slang because the English listening training they are exposed to (not only English proficiency tests but also English classes in school) does not expose them to such language materials. English proficiency test listening training usually has a normal speaking speed, relatively standard accents, more formal expressions, and more academic content. One student stated that even with a high IELTS score, they still had difficulties with listening and oral communication after arriving in the UK: "Getting a better score on the test doesn't mean that even if you get a nine, it doesn't mean that you exactly come here and you can understand people speaking. I think all those problems that we discussed before, they are not very well observed in the test environment."

This leads to them often not understanding conversations with home students, which has two aspects: on one hand, accents affect the comprehension of all conversations, including academic and non-academic ones; slang usage mainly affects daily conversations. It can be said that many listening challenges are not caused by cultural shocks leading to a lack of understanding of topics but rather a fundamental inability to

understand, but from a fundamental inability to grasp what's being said. Subsequently, influenced by their home culture and academic personality, students might pretend to understand and move on, or lose confidence in conversing with local students, retreating to their comfort zone of fellow international students.

Our focus group did not think of a solution for how to better support international students' language issues in daily communication, especially for slang and accents. Of course, students can rely on urban dictionaries, TikTok videos teaching authentic English expressions, or similar training methods that rely on a certain amount of passive memorization (this includes various workshops and workbooks), but this is not a fundamental solution.

However, we reached a consensus on a crucial aspect of supporting international students' communication skills and overall social integration: the relationship between language challenges and how others respond to them. This dynamic is critical as it shapes students' future strategies when facing similar issues—whether to press on, retreat, or ignore the problem.

The success of these interactions hinges on several factors:

1.

Feeling comfortable enough to express when the student doesn't understand, knowing they won't be mocked, or their overall ability questioned.

2.

Feeling respected despite language difficulties, sensing others' confidence in their English skills, which boosts their own confidence to participate.

3.

Feeling equal in the conversation, without needing excessive accommodation that might imply a lack of faith in their language ability.

This may explain why sometimes home students and lecturers slow down their speech or adjust their language to match international students' English level, and our focus group participants had mixed reactions to this approach.

This isn't a new topic, but it's far more challenging in practice than in theory. Our conversational habits are often subconscious, influenced by our upbringing and education. These interactions are coloured by biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. At its core, this issue extends beyond international students to all human relationships. It's about how we truly respect each other in conversation. The fundamental approach is to treat others as we wish to be treated in conversations. This empathy is transferable. You don't need a language learning experience to understand this. Just imagine learning a new skill and you want to ask a question that sounds silly. What kind of response are you expecting?

Academic Integrity and Tool Use

How Students View Academic Integrity Rules

In the latest version of the academic integrity page, there have been some changes compared to the time of the focus group discussion, which to a certain extent addresses some of the previously existing issues. Many students felt that the language used in the original regulations was vague, making it difficult for them to clearly understand the specific boundaries of using AI assistance to complete assignments. The main contradictions we discussed specially centred on one section:

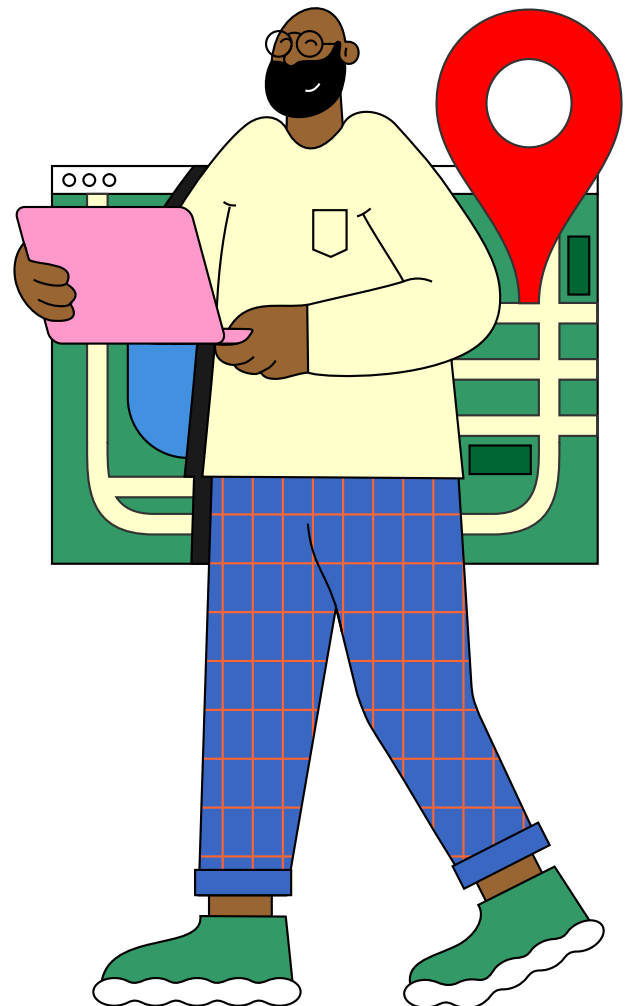
We (the University) consider the **use of AI or translation tools to be cheating** if used for more than:

- generating the occasional short phrase within a sentence
- checking basic grammar and spelling.

After the revision, the new version provides more detailed explanations of some specific behaviours that are strictly prohibited. In fact, most students have reached a consensus on which behaviours constitute serious violations, such as directly using AI-generated frameworks to complete assignments or directly using AI-generated views in assignments. At the same time, they also realize that directly applying AI frameworks is not feasible, and writing tutoring or private tutoring is equally not allowed. Students also noted that the writing generated by AI such as ChatGPT has a unique style that is easily identifiable. This increases the risk of students being discovered when using AI. One student commented, "ChatGPT actually has a very unique way of writing... it's obviously not written by you."

Although the new version provides more detailed categorization and explanation of prohibited items, for some sentences and regulations that were more controversial in our previous discussions, no substantive changes have been made. Students still feel confused, believing that these regulations are too vaguely worded, and they are unsure whether their current use of AI constitutes academic dishonesty. One

student mentioned, "I think personally think that these two points are very vague, and I thought it was purposely vague to allow for a bit of lever for the students. You can say occasional short phrases. Okay, sure. I'll make one-third of my essay generative AI then because if I do two sentences, not from my own head, one sentence from chat GBT, then according to this, I will think that it's fine." Another student felt that "(this guidance) says that everything other than doing this is cheating, so the scope is too broad, so what actually constitutes cheating?"



How Students Interact with the Tools



Our research found that how students use translation software is also related to their major. Some majors may use very technical vocabulary, which are these fixed disciplinary terms. There are also no or very little readings to do. At the same time, students generally believe that translation software cannot handle professional terminology well. For example, one student shared: "Google translate never does it correctly. So usually there's a very specific word that you need to use. And then for example, I just go to Wikipedia in XXX (a language), and then I change the language. And then if you go to English, then you have the correct term for the same thing."

For students studying humanities and social sciences, they use these tools more frequently. Some students believe that the school's regulations on the use of AI are unreasonable. Especially for students from regions and countries with scarce English educational resources, prohibiting the use of external tools or translation software is unfair because they cannot reach the same English level as most students or local students in a short period of time. Some students argue that the school should focus more on assessing and evaluating knowledge rather than just language expression. If academic dishonesty is determined solely based on language reasons or the use of software for assignment writing, it is a very unfair practice. Some other students believe that using translation software is reasonable and justifiable. They stated, "I don't think using language translation software is cheating. It represents technological progress in both academic and other aspects and hasn't hindered my learning. Instead, it has been of greater help to me." They further said that using translation software can help students reach the same starting point as native-speaking students: "I think this is equality. We may need a little more support to stand firm on the same starting line." This viewpoint is worth pondering: how to strike a balance between second language use and expression ability and knowledge mastery?

Students Seeking Help Beyond Tools

We explored whether students seek more help beyond using tools or turn to translation and AI software because they find academic help insufficient. We tried to clarify this causal relationship, although there's a risk of oversimplification.

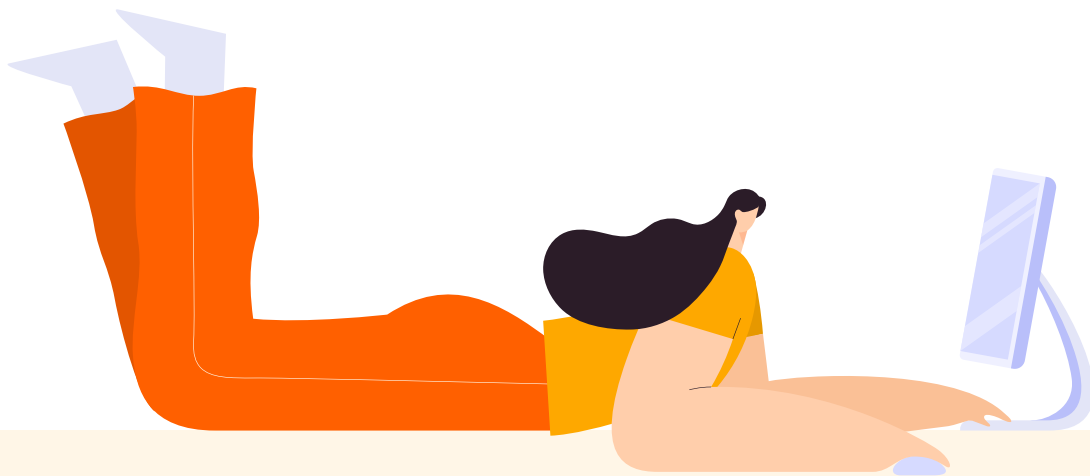
Many students are aware of the support service but participation varies. Some attended workshops but felt they gained little; others knew about them but lacked motivation. Common feedback is that these services are too general, mixing students of different levels. The content inevitably becomes superficial, failing to address specific issues. Many attendees already have a theoretical foundation, finding the content too basic. If students feel they gain little the first time, they're unlikely to participate again.

There's also a mismatch between the timing of writing seminars and actual writing needs. Writing guidance should be provided in a timely manner when students are engaged in specific writing tasks, rather than as a pre-emptive, decontextualized training. The problems students encounter in the writing process are specific and detailed, while the knowledge imparted in seminars is general and broad. Students find it difficult to effectively connect the two, and thus cannot truly apply what they have learned to practice.

For those lacking motivation, time and energy are key factors, especially for master's students. They have too much to deal with initially, making it hard to attend extra courses. With a tight one-year schedule, the time from enrolment to the first deadline is short. By the time they settle in, the first due date is close. Their academic English needs can't be resolved before then, so they prefer solving it themselves or seeking other methods. This highlights the importance of an efficient transition period, allowing students to avoid administrative matters and focus on formal learning. This explains why some students don't seek help from the university when facing difficulties but focus on solving problems independently or with third-party tools. It's the fastest way and offers greater flexibility.

Students' reliance on AI isn't just due to its recent rapid development of AI. Language needs have always existed, just manifested differently. When seeking writing guidance, students face appointment difficulties and long waits, failing to meet their need for timely feedback. Improving writing is a long-term process; a single workshop can't resolve all confusions. One student shared, "I use it to convert to academic writing... because I'm not used to academic language, so I write in my own words, use ChatGPT to convert it." AI tools fill gaps in the current school system, such as privacy, timeliness, and avoiding interpersonal embarrassment. In using them, students may enter grey areas, making it hard to define the scope of use. If AI is already used in other learning processes, students may inevitably avoid similar uses in assignments or assessments.

Some believe that rather than defining when or what scenarios AI is allowed, university should focus on effectively improving students' academic abilities and overall teaching quality. "Using AI largely meets students' immediate needs. It should be seen as a result, not an inducement. It's not because I don't want to get something out of it. It just even if I want to write myself, I don't know how. That's the problem." To some extent, students' reliance on AI or translation tool reveals an underlying academic need.



Based on the preliminary discussion, although our starting point was the academic integrity regulations, we are actually discussing international students' English needs. From the previous chapter's discussion, we can also conclude that English proficiency tests do not fully reflect international students' true English levels and are influenced by various factors. This may lead to some students achieving good scores on English proficiency tests but still being unable to keep up with the university's English requirements. On the other hand, some students who struggled to achieve the required language test scores find themselves even further behind the school's English demands after entering university.

However, we must also consider an important fact: these international students are pursuing degrees in English-speaking countries, and these degrees ensure not only their mastery of subject knowledge but also their English proficiency. This involves a deeper question: should our university conduct more comprehensive assessments of students' English levels during admission, or even raise the standards for English proficiency tests? Setting rules cannot truly solve the fundamental problem. We need to think more deeply: what are the university's actual requirements for international students'

English proficiency during admission? Is the university aware of the potential gap between the English level at admission and the actual needs of the university, and is the university's support for this gap sufficient? We cannot simply define students' use of these tools as academic misconduct; instead, comprehensively examine the root causes that lead them to rely on these tools is a more constructive approach.

Next, I will share the words of a student from an English education resource-poor region of China. Before attending university, she had not received an internationalized curriculum education. I share her experience not to have everyone take a certain stance, but to inspire reflection on how we should rethink or adjust the rules regarding international students' English proficiency. Her experience further illustrates the core point of this booklet: international students' experiences in various aspects, such as English needs, support, tool use, rule adaptation and views, and life, are actually connected to deeper reasons. Sometimes, when looking at these issues, we cannot isolate them as independent, unrelated units.

Doing so fails to fully understand the entire situation. Although her experience is very unique, it may represent some common experiences of some students.

"I attended a regular high school where 100% of my classmates aimed for domestic universities. I chose to study abroad largely because I underperformed in the national college entrance exam and didn't get into my ideal university.

In China, if I didn't go to university, I'd have to attend a vocational college, essentially losing any chance for future advancement. I might never have the opportunity to attend university, would likely marry and have children early, and be forever trapped in my hometown - that would be my fate. But studying abroad gave me a chance to change my life trajectory, allowing me to secure a different future based on abilities beyond just exam scores.

My current situation has been completely transformed by British education. Even if I choose to return to China after graduation, my life will be drastically different compared to if I had gone straight to vocational college after high school. Of course, there's privilege in this - not everyone can afford to study abroad. Given my high school classmates' family backgrounds, hardly anyone could study abroad like me. Our high school was in a relatively poor area, with poor teaching quality and overall student performance. Students from truly well-off families, even if they didn't get into the best high schools, would attend private or international schools. So, my high school classmates were all from relatively poor backgrounds. For me, being able to study abroad is already a privilege, but it's also a result of having no other choice.

I think this is actually a shift in competitive pressure, also related to Britain's colonial history. On one hand, Britain has accumulated a high international reputation in academia, inseparable from the wealth it gained during the colonial era. With such quality educational resources, I believe they have an obligation to accept students from other countries, just like

accepting immigrants and refugees. From this perspective, I see my situation as that of an 'academic refugee', escaping from the poor education system in my home country to Britain.

If someone asks me again why I didn't want to attend a vocational school earlier, I think there's another psychological reason: beyond test scores, I have more ideas and ambitions. As an only child, my parents invested all their resources in me, so they didn't have a choice either. If Britain, as a country with top global educational resources, claims to welcome diversity, why not accept more international students? Why use language as the sole criterion to exclude people? Doesn't this imply they think only English-speaking countries deserve to dominate the world?

Because English happens to be the most mainstream language in the world today, native English speakers don't need to learn a second language. But they only say this without truly realizing its cruelty. If a university admits a group of students with substandard English, they believe it will affect teaching quality and the interests of local students. But if universities lower admission standards to admit international students who pay double fees to solve enrolment problems, isn't this unfair to local students or other international students with excellent language skills?

Many people might leave their hometowns to come to Britain, hoping to change their fate with a foreign degree. But if universities set excessively high language barriers in the name of teaching quality, it undoubtedly deprives many people of the opportunity to change their lives through education. Conversely, why should British universities accept overseas students? If they're concerned about teaching quality, they could close their doors and cultivate local talent, just like Brexit. Isn't accepting international students similar to accepting refugees and immigrants? Between diversity and exclusion, they have to make a choice."





Reflections on Language Support

Looking at these discussions, it's evident that our university's international student body exhibits remarkable diversity, their perspectives on academic integrity and misconduct are closely tied to how they utilize AI or translation tools in their studies. These issues cannot be judged in a black-and-white manner, as they possess considerable complexity. On one hand, we must acknowledge the undeniable importance of English proficiency for students studying in an English-medium environment. On the other hand, we must also fully recognize the diversity among the student population, including the varying levels of educational resources they had access to prior to university, which leads to them facing knowledge challenges of different degrees and forms in their university studies.

Through this discussion, we can arrive at a relatively clear viewpoint and conclusion: currently, the language support provided to international students, or all students is relatively uniform and generic, without more refined categorization based on different student groups or needs, and without sufficient investment in personalized one-on-one assistance.

When we discuss which types of support are particularly helpful, the International Foundation Program is mentioned several times. One student shared: "The IFP helped me the most. Before that, I had never encountered things like presentations or academic writing. Through a year of study, my academic English skills improved tremendously, laying a solid foundation for entering the undergraduate stage. It's like a complete transformation. Rather than language exams, I'm more inclined to attribute the credit to the foundation course."

However, considering that this is a one-year course requiring additional payment, it means students need to pay an extra year's worth of fees equivalent to a formal undergraduate

term and invest a year's time cost. For many students, this is quite a luxury. If the university simply recommends students to participate in a one-year foundation course due to insufficient English proficiency, it is actually a privileged practice. This is unfair for many international students, as they have already paid double tuition fees and should rightfully receive some additional one-on-one free guidance.

We also discussed many other alternative methods. The key lies in finding a good balance between mandatory requirements and autonomy, and providing some relatively structured, short-term courses that can immediately offer academic assistance to students before the start of the academic year or in the initial stages of the term. For example, splitting the content of the one-year foundation course and incorporating it into the education of other students. This could involve providing preliminary academic support via email or recorded online courses before the start of the academic year, or mandating students to participate in some short-term academic training courses in the first few weeks of the term. If certain courses are voluntary or optional, many students may not be aware of the existence of these resources, and even if they are aware, they may not necessarily attend, which in turn neglects many students who truly need academic training. We need to pay special attention to the fact that the prior educational backgrounds of many students do not support or encourage independent learning, and they have experienced such approaches for many years. Suddenly entering an environment that largely requires autonomous learning, they are often unable to quickly transform their way of thinking. Some students said they prefer the university to directly require them to take certain courses, even incorporating it into grade assessments. For them, this is a relatively better approach, before gradually transitioning to independent learning.

Chapter Three⁰³

Beyond borders:

A Sociocultural Journey of Chinese International Students



The previous chapters have focused heavily on the challenges faced by international students during their transition into university and their academic language needs, among other concrete topics. To make this booklet more multidimensional and engaging, I feel it's necessary to add a chapter that paints an overall picture of the Chinese student community from a sociocultural perspective.

Throughout this chapter, I will strive to explore, from an "insider's" point of view and across multiple dimensions including social, cultural, and economic aspects, the motivations behind Chinese students' decision to study abroad, the relationship between the rat race phenomenon and study abroad trends, and the mental health issues they face. Finally, through the self-narratives of international students, I will showcase the impact of the study abroad experience on their self-perception and outlook on life. By discussing these five aspects, I hope to present readers with a more comprehensive, vivid, and authentic portrait of Chinese students studying abroad. It's important to note that due to the diversity and complexity of the Chinese master's student group in the UK, my observations and analysis cannot represent the situation of all international students and are not universally applicable. Each international student has their unique background, experiences, and feelings, and I have no intention of overgeneralizing or depicting stereotypes of any individual or group. I hope this chapter can provide faculty and staff with valuable insights and food for thought, helping them understand the inner world of this group from multiple angles and see the giant ice beneath the iceberg.



Chinese Higher Education Rat Race

In recent years, the number of Chinese students studying in the UK has experienced explosive growth. This phenomenon reflects the rapid development of China's economy and the overall improvement of the nation's education level. An increasing number of families have accumulated a certain level of economic strength, giving them the ability and willingness to support their children in pursuing further education abroad, in order to access higher-quality educational resources and broader personal development prospects.

Data shows that the proportion of Chinese students who choose to study in the UK after working for a period of time has decreased. In other words, more Chinese students are inclined to directly enter master's programs after completing their undergraduate studies, rather than first gaining work experience before returning to campus. This trend is closely related to the career development mindset of contemporary Chinese youth. They hope to gain a competitive edge in the fierce job market by completing their education as early as possible and swiftly entering the workforce.

This phenomenon is connected to the increasingly prominent issue of "rat race" in Chinese society in recent years. Rat race describes a state of white-hot competition where people spare no effort in investing time and energy into all aspects of life, striving to gain even the slightest advantage and squeeze into others' living space. The essence of rat race reflects the problem of unbalanced and insufficient development. When incremental resources are lacking, existing resources are excessively concentrated in certain fields, leading to excessive competition and low-level repetition. The rat race phenomenon has permeated nearly every corner of Chinese society, from kindergartens to workplaces, from academics to relationships. Many people, despite knowing that such competition is meaningless and yields minimal rewards, still find it difficult to escape. Once they attempt to withdraw from this competition, they face moral pressure and questioning from all sides.



China's education system revolves around two key nodes: the college entrance examination (gaokao) and the graduate school entrance examination, both of which are exceptionally competitive. In 2022, the number of gaokao registrants nationwide reached 11.93 million. That's more than the combined population of London and Birmingham. Among the 11.93 million candidates, only 34% were admitted to undergraduate programs. In some popular provinces, the competition is even more intense. For example, Henan Province has the highest number of gaokao registrants in the country, but the undergraduate admission rate is a mere 13.8%, less than one-seventh. As for graduate education, the highest level of higher education, the number of spots is even more scarce. Therefore, China implements "total quantity control" on master's program enrolment. In 2022, the national enrolment scale for master's students was approximately 1.21 million, and for doctoral students, it was around 110,000, totalling less than 12% of the gaokao army. Roughly estimating, among the 11.93 million gaokao participants, only about 11% will eventually have the opportunity to pursue a master's degree or higher. In popular institutions and majors, the admission rates are staggeringly low. In 2022, Renmin University of China had 42,762 applicants for its master's programs, but the enrolment plan was a mere 2,422, resulting in an admission rate of only 5.7%.

Moreover, China's higher education system implements a clear hierarchical division. At the top are the "Double First-Class" universities, which include 42 first-class universities and 465 first-class disciplines. Outside of the "Double First-Class" are key universities such as those in the "985 Project" and "211 Project." These institutions hold absolute advantages in terms of teaching resources, research strength, and social reputation. In contrast, the educational conditions and quality of the vast majority of "non-985 non-211" universities vary widely. For students from "non-985 non-211" universities who were unable to enter key universities at the undergraduate level, the chances of succeeding in the fierce graduate school entrance examination are even more remote. They not only have to compete with outstanding candidates from all over the country but also overcome their own disadvantages in terms of educational resources and academic accumulation. Even if they are admitted to a master's program at their alma mater, the admission rate and training quality often cannot compare to that of "Double First-Class" and other prestigious universities.

In addition to the pressure of further education, Chinese graduates also face a grim employment situation. Among the factors, the devaluation of academic qualifications is undoubtedly an important one. With the rapid expansion of higher education, the value of college degrees has been continuously declining, and an undergraduate degree is no longer a key to the job market. Many employers set a master's degree as a recruitment threshold, further exacerbating students' anxiety about academic qualifications. Under immense employment pressure, pursuing a master's degree has become an important way for many students to seek a competitive edge.



Motivations and Trends in Studying Abroad

It is against this backdrop that obtaining a master's degree from a prestigious overseas university has become a crucial pathway for many students to break through numerous constraints and achieve academic advancement and career development. In comparison, the threshold for master's education in the UK is relatively lower. Although applications to top universities can be quite challenging, the overall admission rate is significantly higher than the domestic level in China. While the application difficulty for top universities like Oxford and Cambridge is on par with China's graduate school entrance examination, most British universities do not have stringent requirements for applicants' backgrounds. Take the Russell Group universities (equivalent to China's "985" universities) as an example. Most of these universities only require a 2:1 undergraduate average (corresponding to 75-80 points in the Chinese system). There are even schools that accept a 2:2 (corresponding to 70-75 points in China).

More importantly, British universities' overall performance in the QS World University Rankings far surpasses that of China. In the 2025 QS rankings, China only has universities in the top 100. In contrast, the UK has 4 universities ranked in the top 10, 15 in the top 100. It can be said that the density and depth of British universities on the QS list far exceed those of China. For students who find it difficult to gain admission to master's programs at top-tier universities in China, studying at a QS top 100 university in the UK is undoubtedly more attractive. Therefore, driven by multiple favourable factors, an increasing number of Chinese students choose to bypass the numerous obstacles of China's graduate school entrance examination and exchanging for the ideal academic advancement at a lower cost of time and opportunity by studying abroad.

For students who struggle to gain admission to master's programs at top-tier universities in China, studying at a QS top 100 university in the UK is undeniably more appealing. On the one hand, most British master's programs are one year in duration, which means a shorter length of study and a relatively lighter financial burden. Moreover, many majors do not have unified examination requirements, allowing students to gain admission based on their academic performance and research abilities. On the other hand, a degree from a prestigious overseas university can also provide a strong competitive advantage for one's career, enhancing competitiveness in both the domestic and global job markets.



Challenges and Social Stigmatization

Studying abroad is not a panacea and cannot fundamentally solve the problem of rat race. International students face numerous challenges in their pursuit of education in a foreign country, such as language barriers, cultural barriers, and academic barriers, requiring them to invest more time and energy compared to local students in order to adapt. Admittedly, there is a group of diligent and studious individuals who can quickly adjust their mindset. However, it cannot be denied that a considerable portion of students are hindered by language barriers, which in turn affects their learning outcomes. In mild cases, they may feel like sitting on pins and needles in class, not knowing where to start with assignments, and heavily relying on tools. In severe cases, they may simply give up and seek assistance from agency and essay ghostwriters. During each exam and graduation season, a large number of failures and even dropouts indirectly fuel an industry called "academic appeals."

Another sizeable group of students is heavily tinted with utilitarianism. They may have little interest in knowledge itself and lack enthusiasm for the subject. In their eyes, the meaning of studying abroad seems to be reduced to the ultimate goal of obtaining a degree. This short-sighted mentality not only reflects individual value deviations but also highlights the prevalence of utilitarian educational views in Chinese society. Indeed, we cannot ignore the fact that there are indeed some problems and chaos within the group of Chinese students studying in the UK. Some students' utilitarian study abroad motivations, short-sighted learning attitudes, and opportunistic academic behaviours have, to a certain extent, fuelled the spread of the "watered-down master's" stigma. These phenomena not only damage the overall reputation of Chinese students studying abroad but also provide an excuse for the proliferation of the "watered-down master's" label.

The term "watered-down master's" is a derogatory phrase referring to one-year master's degrees in the UK, implying that such programs have short durations, low academic standards, and little substantive value, with low admission thresholds - like a diluted version of a real master's degree. Some even joke that "you can enrol just by paying the tuition fees." A watered-down master is associated with students whose academic performance is not particularly strong, but who can still gild their credentials by studying abroad. Many people question how a mere one year of study can meet the academic rigor and training of a traditional master's program.

The stigmatization of watered-down masters in Chinese society actually reflects a deep-rooted rat race mindset and a utilitarian social ethos. Under this mode of thinking, education is simplistically equated with degrees and credentials, and learning is narrowly understood as a pursuit of exams and diplomas. People's understanding of education becomes constricted and superficial, and the evaluation of personal ability and worth becomes one-dimensional and rigid. The "involution" in education manifests in an extreme worship of degrees and elite schools, in the cutthroat competition to advance academically, and in a single-minded pursuit of test scores and rankings. Against this backdrop, the watered-down master's label becomes a convenient and potent weapon to belittle those who choose different educational paths. Those who look down on watered-down masters are essentially scorning a lifestyle and set of values that deviates from the mainstream. In their eyes, only the credentials obtained through exam-centric education are legitimate, and only the success achieved through competition is valid.

Mental Health Challenges

To examine this issue, we adopted a mini electronic ethnographic approach, collecting and analysing data from social media posts and comments. The overall framework is based on insights from a Chinese psychological counsellor working for the NHS, who outlined the key mental health challenges faced by Chinese international students from four main perspectives. The remaining quotes come directly from students' posts and comments, all shared with permission for anonymous publication.

A 2023 study on Chinese international students revealed a staggering statistic: 75% had no prior experience living or studying overseas before embarking on their educational journey abroad². For most Chinese students, pursuing a master's degree in the UK marks their first time being immersed in a foreign cultural environment for an extended period. Beyond the academic pressures, they must invest substantial time and energy into adapting to new lifestyles, learning styles, and social circles. The combination of financial and moral

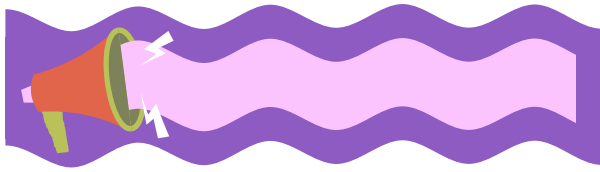
pressures along with real-world challenges creates a significant psychological burden for these students. Language barriers, academic hurdles, and cultural gaps present themselves as one obstacle after another, while parental expectations, peer competition, and an uncertain future weigh heavily on their shoulders.

This unrelenting psychological stress contributes to a high prevalence of mental health issues like depression and anxiety among Chinese international students. One survey of Chinese students at UK universities found that nearly 30% self-reported experiencing depressive tendencies, while 14% had suicidal thoughts³. Falling behind academically and facing setbacks in personal relationships often serve as the tipping point, shattering students' psychological defences. These mental health struggles, in turn, negatively impact their academic performance and daily life, perpetuating a vicious cycle.

1. Loneliness and Lack of Belonging

The "pal" phenomenon among Chinese international students aptly illustrates the dynamic and complex nature of belonging. "Pals" refers to finding companions to study and live with while abroad, such as coffee pals, dining pals, cooking pals, class pals, and library pals. However, these relationships often lack deep emotional connections, instead being built upon utilitarian needs. As one student vented on social media, "Pals may not care whether you're happy or not. If you're upset, they won't offer comfort or support, brushing past your emotions and only inviting you to eat once you've gotten over it. They might even leave your messages on read. They just want to grab a meal or take photos with you. They may call themselves your friends, but deep down, you're not truly a friend to them."

While pal relationships can initially help alleviate loneliness and fulfill some belonging needs, they fail to fundamentally address the deeper issues of emotional attachment and social integration that students face over time. In a sense, "pal relationships" are more akin to band-aid solutions in a fragmented life. One student reflected, "Back in China, socializing was effortless because there were countless opportunities and groups that enveloped you in various social circles, with people constantly coming and going. After coming to the UK, those days are gone, replaced by tightly-knit, small-group socializing among fellow international students. While this provides a strong sense of belonging initially, its effectiveness is short-lived."



Beyond superficial socializing within the Chinese community, many Chinese students also attempt to integrate into local social circles, often to no avail. "You come with certain expectations, and the university keeps encouraging diversity and inclusiveness, but reality doesn't match what you envisioned. There's a sense of social helplessness when trying to break into local student cliques. I'll always be the Chinese person who can't quite fit in," one student lamented on social media. Others believe that "Chinese people integrating into Western society will always be a wicked problem. No matter how much you try to shed your East Asian identity, you'll always be seen as an 'outlier trying too hard to be interesting but coming across as awkward,' ultimately leaving you feeling divided, pained, and trapped in a cycle of self-doubt. They may appear polite and courteous, seemingly taking a great interest in you, but in reality, they don't truly care and just see you as part of their 'diversity' display, showcasing how inclusive and open-minded they are."

Of course, some students choose to approach social integration with a more open-minded perspective. They "believe that social circles are inherently different, so why force integration? Being true to yourself is integration, being self-consistent is integration, and Chinese students sticking together is also a form of integration; existence is justified. Aren't they advocating for diversity? This is my unique characteristic."

2. Financial Pressure and Guilt

Many international students, even those from well-off families, experience intense financial pressure and guilt. One student candidly shared on social media, "Perhaps you've also calculated the cost per class and questioned the value of the courses, unable to escape measuring this investment in terms of whether studying abroad will pay off."

For wealthy families, the high cost of studying abroad may be a drop in the bucket. But for average middle-class families, paying substantial tuition and living expenses is undoubtedly an enormous challenge. To support their children's education abroad, many families have to go all-in. If the family's financial situation fluctuates, the study abroad plan may face the risk of being interrupted. This economic pressure looms like the sword of Damocles over middle-class families.

In addition to the financial burden, China's unique "culture of shame" intensifies the anxiety

of middle-class families. In Chinese society, an individual's success or failure is often closely tied to the family's honour or disgrace. If a student fails while studying abroad or struggles to find employment upon returning home, not only does the student have to bear the setback, but the family also suffers the humiliation of "losing face."

One international student expressed this conflicted sentiment on social media: "If my family's financial situation was poor, perhaps I would just pursue a stable job that pays well. But the reality is that my parents gave me the opportunity to study abroad and the confidence to pursue my dreams without worrying about money. However, my family is not wealthy either, so I always think about becoming financially independent, going to school every day with a sense of guilt. I think if my family was either very poor or very rich, I wouldn't have this contradiction of being stuck in the middle. Maybe my parents wouldn't mind supporting me for life and wouldn't care about the cost of studying abroad, but I still feel conflicted inside."

3 • Self-Doubt and Inferiority

The study abroad experience allows many Chinese students to directly witness the world's diversity for the first time. They encounter outstanding students from various countries, some with exceptional intelligence, some from affluent backgrounds, some with striking appearances, and some with extraordinary abilities. While this diversity broadens their horizons, it can also trigger self-comparison and a clash of values.

One student from a modest background poured their heart out: "I don't have a well-off family to fall back on, no impressive credentials to flaunt. For the sake of a future, I believe I can control, for the sake of not letting down my parents who have toiled half their lives to fund my education, all I can do is bury my head in my books and swallow the hardships that come my way. Sometimes people invite me to go out and have fun, but I have to make excuses about being too busy. The truth is, I don't want to spend money on leisure, on things that might bring me joy but would be seen as 'unnecessary' expenses. I don't have the courage to admit to others that it's simply too costly for me. People aren't obligated to understand your struggles, so gradually, the invitations stopped coming. I never breathe a word of this to my parents because I know that a child's pain is magnified tenfold for a parent. I can only share the good news, never the bad."

4. Exacerbated Tensions in Family

The study abroad experience can also impact students' existing family relationships. Some students have shared their conflicting experiences on social media.

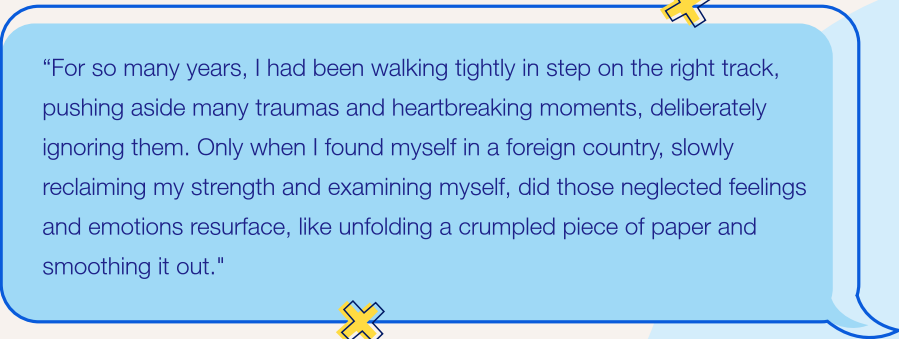
"When I make personal choices or express my own opinions, my parents accuse me of 'growing wings and flying away, forgetting how they raised me,' and say things like 'if we had known, we wouldn't have sent you abroad to study.' When I try to confide in them about my stress and loneliness, I'm criticized for 'not being hardworking enough' or 'wasting money.'" The study abroad experience exposes students to new ideas and allows them to form independent value judgments. However, this independence may be misinterpreted by parents as deviation and ingratitude.

Another student expressed an even deeper cultural conflict on social media: "Upon returning to China, from the very first week, an overwhelming sense of anxiety hit me. The lack of understanding from family and friends, coupled with their relentless imposition of beliefs, left me feeling like there was nowhere to escape. Forced ideological conformity, being misunderstood, and even having my own views suppressed – these were scenarios I had gradually distanced myself from during my three years in the UK, but now, everything came rushing back..." Changes in international students' values and ways of thinking can diverge from the beliefs of their parents and friends, leading to conflicts and clashes.



5. What Students Learn from Studying Abroad

During their time studying in a foreign country, students must learn to take care of themselves and become comfortable with solitude and self-reflection. It is a process of self-discovery and personal growth. From initial struggles to gradual adaptation, from relying on others to learning independence, students' minds mature through loneliness. We can catch a glimpse of the profound impact the study abroad experience has on their self-perception, cultural introspection, and life attitudes.



"For so many years, I had been walking tightly in step on the right track, pushing aside many traumas and heartbreaking moments, deliberately ignoring them. Only when I found myself in a foreign country, slowly reclaiming my strength and examining myself, did those neglected feelings and emotions resurface, like unfolding a crumpled piece of paper and smoothing it out."



"Growing up, our education rarely touched on building self-awareness. It wasn't until I went abroad that I distinctly felt that part of 'me' awakening within."



"I think studying abroad leaves a mark. Even as I'm about to return what I learned in school to my teachers, the imprint it leaves on my personality remains."



"In a sense, studying abroad is a form of externalization, temporarily setting aside one's social groups, culture, and national identity to step outside and observe other countries and cultures, as well as one's own. It leads to many insights and a clearer perspective on many things."



"Leaving your comfort zone to live, study, and work in an unfamiliar country, encountering problems and solving them, and approaching cultural conflicts with a calmer or more detached attitude – it makes you more rational and courageous. I believe life is about constantly exploring, making mistakes, and accumulating experience points."



"I've witnessed various life paths. Some people drop out of school in China to study in the UK, some have families and later pursue graduate studies, and some begin traveling the world in their 30s. Life shouldn't be limited. I want to see how flowers bloom, how water flows, how mountains rise, to go to the faraway places I yearn for, and to become the person I most want to be."





Since I was young, I was the kid other parents wished they had. I got good grades, had a great personality, and got into a decent college. But the school wasn't as amazing as I thought it would be. As a child from an average family, studying abroad was never part of my parents' plan. I stumbled into applying, and my family could barely afford one year of tuition for a master's in the UK. Throughout the process of picking schools, finding an agency, and taking the IELTS, I hit every obstacle imaginable. Finally, I got accepted into a university with a good QS ranking.

I once thought I was the smartest person in the world when it came to planning my future. I avoided the pain of grad school entrance exams and the torture of civil service exams, while enjoying the one of the best education system in the world. By spending just one year to get a master's degree that would've taken three years of hard work in China, I felt like I had won the jackpot.

During my master's, I woke up every morning in a tiny room that could barely fit a bed and desk. With no time to get ready, I'd throw on a t-shirt and rush to catch the subway to my first class. Faced with a totally new language and environment, everything felt so foreign. I couldn't understand the lectures and had to speak up in group discussions... When the professor asked questions, I had to repeat them in my head multiple times before daring to open my mouth. While trying to adapt, I scolded myself for being so dumb, not being able to learn, and wanting to give up.

baForeign students raised their hands to ask questions whenever, while I realized I rely understood the surface level when I thought about asking something, and immediately felt they were so amazing. With a totally different teaching style, I had no idea how to study for exams, what the key points were, or how to do assignments. I could only figure it out slowly on my own.

Maybe this is what studying abroad is all about—growth is a lonely and helpless process. The unfamiliar surroundings, the language barrier, and the little hassles of daily life... Studying abroad alone may be the bravest choice I've ever made. But a strong choice beats everything. Looking back on those painful experiences, they don't seem so terrible anymore. I steadied my heart, tried hard to fit in, and did well on essays and group projects. Most of my friends were just as conflicted as I was. We cried our eyes out at night, questioning why we even came abroad, then pulled ourselves together and told our parents everything was fine. When my parents asked how I was doing and if I had enough money, I was on the verge of breaking down. I was terrified of getting bad grades, not finding a good job, and wasting my parents' savings on my education. Every night, I couldn't help but cry, but in the morning, I'd feel okay again, only to break down again at night, over and over.





Today, my living expenses came in, and I didn't want to eat in the cafeteria. I wanted to treat myself. But a bowl of Lanzhou beef noodles cost 14 pounds, which instantly crushed my spirit. In the end, I slurped up every drop of the noodles and soup, then had to rush back to campus to get ready for the next class.

I often staked out sales at the supermarket and gritted my teeth to carry heavy groceries back myself. It was two huge bags of food, with textbooks and a laptop on my back.

But what do these things matter? My parents never tell me about their own hardships. I feel really lucky and proud of my own courage. The facts have shown that through my own efforts, I've truly restarted my life, going from an average college in China to studying at a prestigious school in the UK. I believe that in the near future, I'll definitely be able to repay my parents with my own abilities.

The beautifully curated life is my social media feed, while the poorly built reality is my actual life. Seeing my friend going to soak up the sun in Barcelona again, I feel hopeless facing my three deadlines. Shouldn't April and May be the time for spring outings with grass growing and birds chirping? How come I'm tightly controlled by tasks every day, spending 24/7 in the library?

I finally had time to go to Europe and took 800 gorgeous photos. Today, when I looked in the mirror in the library bathroom, even I had to admit that the disheveled wild woman in the mirror was a far cry from the girl on holiday in my social media posts. I don't know if this one-year master's study visa, with its massive academic pressure, will let me find a stable job in the UK. I'm also not sure if I'll be able to compete with the people who took the grad school entrance exam when I return to China. My classmates come from wealthy families with tons of connections, while I have nothing. But my parents always encourage me and believe I can succeed with my own abilities. Maybe my skills aren't enough yet to put me on the stage I want. Education is just an entry requirement; the future path is even more difficult and rough.

I've thought about giving up, but I choose to persist.

I believe that none of my efforts will be in vain.

I'm just an average master's student from an ordinary family.

I stand on my parents' shoulders, using education to change my perspective and my destiny.

