

**Students as Consumers? Chinese International Students'  
Perspectives and Experiences in UK Universities**

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## Abstract

With the neoliberal ideology permeating the British higher education (HE) sector, students are repositioned as consumers, which has attracted substantial criticism. However, little empirical evidence proves that students identify themselves as consumers. This study engages Chinese international students from 43 universities in the United Kingdom (UK) with 848 survey responses and 51 interviews to contribute their perspectives and experiences on the controversial proposition.

Findings capture some consumerism features among students, but these relate to more marginal parts of the student experience. A range of intrinsic motivations drive students to engage with their studies, such as subject interest and self-development. Despite paying high tuition, most students do not express entitlement to a degree with minimum effort. While some students support consumer rights, they challenge the rationality of consumer identity conflicting with their other social categories.

Chinese students are highly aware of marketisation and their role as international students in perceived profit-making intention in UK HE. However, their attitudes towards marketisation executed by different HE stakeholders vary. Students show greater acceptance of the UK government and university managers marketising HE so that more international students can study in the UK and sufficient funding can be devoted to better facilities and teaching. They are very critical of applying the market mechanisms to teaching and learning. They urge their teaching staff to see their demands stemming from their identities as learners rather than consumers.

This study sheds light on the rise of student consumerism and the impacts of marketisation on students' lives and studies. The empirical insights challenge the pervasiveness of the conceptualisation of students as consumers and broaden institutional practitioners' understanding of students' educational orientation and identity construction. The results inform policymakers and institutional practitioners to rethink student-consumer positioning and promote more scholarly attention to international student construction in higher education policy.

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Students as consumers?

Many countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have actively championed neoliberalism and adopted market-led mechanisms to reform their public sectors (Harvey, 2005; Hunt & Boliver, 2021). The higher education (HE) sector in the UK is considered one of the most highly marketised systems in the world (Brooks et al, 2021; Brown & Carasso, 2013), which can be seen through its state funding reforms, new institutional governance and shifting relationships between universities and students. Among all the drastic changes, students have been repositioned as consumers. The identification of students as consumers started explicitly in the 1990s in the Dearing report (1997) (Bunce et al, 2017; Bennett, 2021) and the more recent promotion of the construction with the Higher Education White Paper: Students at the Heart of the System (2011). The legitimisation of the position and the rights are protected by the Consumer Act (Consumer Act, 2015) and Competition and Markets Authority (Competition and Markets Authority, 2016). Therefore, student-as-consumer has been gradually normalised within government policies and the HE regulators. For example, Office for Students published an insight brief to provide a range of principles and guidance to protect students as consumers' rights with consumer protection (Office for Students, 2023a) and defended students' consumer rights have to be prioritised by universities and colleges (Office for Students, 2023b).

Although neoliberalism is “in here, in the head, the heart and the soul” (Ball, 2016, p. 1047) and the marketing in the HE sector is well established (Guilbault, 2018; Sherry, 2021), the legitimated role of student-as-consumer attracts ongoing debate and controversy. The concerns of negative impacts of student-as-consumer come across from academic practice to student learning and the purpose of higher education. For example, some argue that consumerism compromises education quality (Harrison & Risler, 2015; Sherry, 2021), that the role of the consumer promotes passive and instrumental learning (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005) and that consumer identity undermines the identity of the learner (Molesworth et al, 2009; Nixon et al, 2018). The consumer identity is not welcomed among academics who refuse to be ‘service providers’ and are concerned academic standards are degraded (van der Velden, 2011; Naidoo et al, 2011). They further worry that student-as-consumer demands value for money based on future employment and personal economic gain will distract the focus on fostering critical thinking, deep learning and personal development.

However, some scholars support applying marketing practice within HE and promote the concept of students as consumers. For example, the marketing scholar Guilbault (2016, 2018) believes the debate about students as customers should be reframed and ended. The author argues that the marketing in HE is well-established, continuing to debate or denying students as consumers will fail to acknowledge students' rights and meet their satisfaction (ibid.). The proponents (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Mark, 2013) also argue that opponents use an outdated marketing view of 'the customer is always right' to reject considering students to be consumers. Instead, they believe that student-consumers can be active participants and co-producers of their education and enjoy consumers' rights. Woodall et al (2014) argue that adopting a student-consumer identity enables their value to be measured and better operationalises marketing practice to better understand students' value for money and help students make sense of their higher education.

## **1.2 The missing voices**

While the debate raises concerns and benefits of the student-consumer orientation, the student's voice is largely missing. There is an increasing assumption that students have repositioned themselves as consumers of their education (Saunders, 2007, 2015; Brooks & Arahams, 2018). Little empirical research has investigated if students perceive themselves as consumers and take consumer-orientated approaches to their studies (Bunce et al, 2017; Bunce, 2019). In addition, how marketised HE impacts students' daily life is still less known (Brooks et al, 2021). Some scholars shift the attention to explore students' experiences and perspectives. For example, Bunce et al (2017) surveyed 608 undergraduates in England and explored their consumer orientation and identity and their impacts on academic performance. Tomlinson (2017) conducted qualitative research with 68 undergraduate students from seven UK institutions to capture students' perceptions of consumers' identities. Brooks and Abrahams (2018) built on that of Tomlinson (2017) and analysed policy documents and focus group-interviewed 52 British nationality undergraduates to explore students' attitudes towards the construction of students as consumers. Reynolds (2022) conducted mixed methods research to explore students' identities in an increasingly marketised British HE sector.

The findings of these studies do not fully indicate that students view themselves as consumers of their HE. On the contrary, they outline that students have various understanding and attitudes towards the concept of student-consumer. Although some students take on the position, the acceptance is not straightforward but encompasses only certain aspects of their HE. A majority of findings point out that students desire consumer rights but challenge the concept puts them into

a passive and instrumental position and reframe their relationships with their institutions and teaching staff as cold, with an impersonal business dynamic. The complexity of the construction of students as consumers and students' perceptions and attitudes towards the concept requires more and further scholarly attention. More importantly, the current studies focus on UK home students, the results cannot be generalised to international students. International students' perspectives on the consumerist position and their relationships with their universities are little known, even though they account for a substantial part of UK HE. For example, in 2021/22, there were 679,970 international students who studied in UK HE institutions, which made up 22% of the whole student population (HESA, 2023). Therefore, without including international students' voices, the debate remains incomplete.

### **1.3 Research aims**

The main aim of this thesis is to explore if Chinese students view themselves as consumers of their higher education and how they perceive the impacts of marketisation on their lives and studies in the UK. Chinese students constituted the largest group of international students, of which about 1 in 4 were Chinese in 2021/22 (HESA, 2023). The annual increase rate of Chinese students since 2016 was 12%, 12%, 17% and 1.4% (2019/20 Covid-19) (HESA,2022). With the increasing number of Chinese students in UK HEIS, the marketing strategy for international student recruitment is well established. This group of students can also be seen as consumers of the nature of paying the highest tuition fee in the HE sector. However, no evidence proves these students view themselves as consumers and approach their higher education with a consumer orientation. Therefore, it is essential to challenge the current pervasiveness of the conceptualisation of students as consumers by seeking answers from Chinese international students as a group of missing voices at the extant literature.

The thesis focuses on the postgraduate level, as postgraduate education provides a prominent marketised context. The regulation of postgraduate education is less strict than that of undergraduate education. There is no fee cap on master's in England, which means institutions can charge whatever they think consumers are willing to pay (Mateos González & Wakeling, 2020). In addition, postgraduate students' employability and satisfaction are excluded from key quality indicators. Postgraduate programmes attract a higher level of international students who pay the full tuition fee and study among the most expensive programmes in UK universities. Students are positioned as consumers due to the nature of paying the highest fee.

Regarding Chinese international students' social construction, they are often perceived as economic subjects (Brooks, 2017; Xu, 2021; Yao & Mwang, 2022) or positioned as 'deficit' (Mittelmeier & Lomer, 2021) and 'Chinese learners' academically (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; McMahon, 2011; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020). Therefore, the study also aims to go beyond the exploration of their perceptions of consumer positioning to discuss their other social constructions to provide a comprehensive understanding. The study also offers Chinese students the opportunity to participate in the debate on student-consumer identity and further reflect on their construction within an increasingly marketised HE sector in the UK.

## 1.4 Research questions

The principal research question guiding this study is:

**How do Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students perceive the identity of student-as-consumer in UK universities?**

The sub research questions ask Chinese PGT students:

- a) What are their motivations and expectations (including those of their parents) from their studies in the UK?
- b) How do they approach their studies and interact with their teaching staff in the UK?
- c) How do they perceive the marketisation of UK higher education and the impacts of the market practice on their lives and studies?
- d) How do they (re)construct their identities within UK higher education and perceive their relationships with the UK government, their universities, and teaching staff?

## 1.5 Significance of the study

This study is essential to address the gap in the existing literature on the impacts of neoliberal ideology on students' lives and experiences in UK universities, especially the underrepresented international student cohort. As international students comprise around 22% of the student population, and their economic impact on the UK has been valued at £28.8 billion annually (Gov.UK, 2022), it is important to understand their perspectives on the student-as-consumer debate and narratives centred around their identity construction. Over the last decade, Chinese students have come to represent a significant part of the UK postgraduate student body. Therefore, it is a timely project to engage Chinese international students to contribute their perspectives and

experiences on the rise of consumerism discussion and identity construction. The empirical insights will further support policymaking with conceptualising and constructing higher education students.

Understanding students' perspectives about the purpose of higher education plays a vital role in policy and practice (Brooks et al., 2021). Although the student-as-consumer approach is regarded as a strategy to promote university competition and protection of consumer rights, it is jeopardised when students' main purpose is to learn rather than consume. Therefore, this study provides empirical evidence on how Chinese students approach their higher education in the UK and what the purpose of higher education is to them. In addition, the cohort comes from significantly different social, cultural and educational backgrounds compared to their UK peers, which provides new insights and angles to the current discussion of student consumerism and university student identity construction.

One of the strong criticisms about consumer orientation is that students expect to gain their degrees with minimum effort (Molesworth et al., 2009; Arbikeda & Alonso, 2023). The student-consumer approach allows students to perceive their learning as services and their teaching staff as service providers. However, there is a lack of evidence proving students actually actively approach their studies with a consumer orientation. Therefore, this study explores Chinese students from an academic perspective to understand their commitment to learning and their relationship with the teaching staff. Exploring their learning approach broadens practitioners' understanding of learner identities in HE, which further helps them to provide students with accurate pedagogical approaches and academic settings.

Brooks and O'Shea (2021) highlight the importance of understanding how contemporary students construct their identities and how other social actors construct them. International students' economic benefits to the UK are explicitly proven and promoted in government documents and institutional policies. The narratives around international students are economic-centred, which they are privileged as the ideal neoliberal and economic subjects within UK international education policy (Xu, 2021) and are commonly constructed as 'cash cows' with the marketisation of higher education (Robertson, 2011; Xu, 2021; Yao & Mwangi, 2022). Compared with the pervasive proposition and characteristics, less is known about how students understand these narratives and how market forces affect their academic pursuits. In addition, most studies fail to ask about students' perceptions towards different key HE stakeholders who identify them as consumers and

apply business logic to transform their studies. Therefore, this study addresses the gap by exploring Chinese postgraduates' opinions on being recognised as consumers and their level of acceptance toward marketisation conducted by different social categories: the UK government, the institution leaders and the teaching staff.

International students are absent from the construction of English higher education policy even though they comprise a substantial proportion of the HE sector. Most English HE policy documents address domestic students (Brooks, 2018), which causes equality and inclusiveness concerns. Instead of focusing on the ongoing academic deficit narrative associated with Chinese students (Moosavi, 2020b, 2021), concerns about the apparent lack of diversity due to the preponderance of recruitment from China (Lomer et al., 2021) and over-reliance on Chinese students financially (Brunce & Bond, 2022), this study shifts the dominant focus to encourage Chinese students to participate in a debate associated with their identity and rights but also hopefully provokes more scholarly attention to international students in the HE policy discussion.

## **1.6 Overview of the thesis**

The thesis contains the following main chapters apart from the Introduction, and the overview of each chapter is provided.

Chapter 2 reviews the context of a changing HE landscape in the UK and the implications of neoliberalism and marketisation on the HE agenda. Current literature about the debate of student-as-consumer is reviewed and analysed. The chapter also discusses identity, social identity and related theoretical perspectives to connect the theories to education and university students.

Chapter 3 provides the methodology and research methods to answer the research questions. The rationale for conducting a mixed-method research approach is explained. The chapter then discusses the data analysis approach, describes the data collection process, and includes my reflections.

Chapter 4 draws upon quantitative and qualitative results to present Chinese students' internal and external motivations for postgraduate study, studying internationally, selecting the UK as a destination, and choosing their institutions. Understanding each essential element these participants consider during each decision-making stage provides an examination of students' perceptions of the value of their postgraduate education. The chapter then investigates the



expectations of the students and the actual true fee payers: their parents. The discussion and analysis of what Chinese students and their parents expect from the study further address to what extent Chinese students hold a consumer orientation towards their education in the UK.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus on Chinese students' commitment and approaches to their studies and their opinions on the teaching practice and teacher-student relationships. The chapter discusses the academic challenges that Chinese students commonly state in a new learning setting. It then presents how students tackle these challenges by negotiating with old learning habits and beliefs and forming a new learning identity claimed as closer to a Western learner. Following the discussion of students' perspectives on teaching practice and their relationships with their teachers, the chapter presents students' rejection of teachers with perfunctory attitudes who treat them as consumers or products.

Chapter 6 provides interviewees' understanding and perceptions of the marketisation of UK higher education and the impacts of the marketised context on their experience and identity construction. The chapter starts with students' general perceptions of the phenomenon of marketisation. Then it summarises four main characteristics students consider significant market-led approaches adopted by the international student industry, institutions, and the UK government. It then discusses three attitudes Chinese students held towards marketisation and their reasons and concerns.

Chapter 7 continues the analysis of students' perspectives towards consumerism and student-consumer discourse. It addresses whether the students see themselves as consumers within UK higher education. The chapter begins with participants' first reaction to student-as-consumer identity, as most of them claimed they were unfamiliar with the discourse and never associated themselves as consumers before the interviews. It then examines students' consumer orientation through their attitudes towards tuition fees, instrumental goals and sense of entitlement.

Chapter 8 unravels students' complex and multi-layered identities (re)construction by drawing on quantitative and qualitative data. Deep insights into how Chinese students understand the identity of international students, learners, Chinese, foreigners and academic partners are further achieved to show the compatibility and conflict between these identities and consumers' identity. The chapter then presents students' acceptance and rejection towards different positions that they are

identified by other three main stakeholders: the UK government, the university and the teaching staff.

Chapter 9 highlights the significance of the findings and the implications stemming from the results of this study. It discusses the new insights added to the current debate on student-consumer with the contribution of Chinese students as the biggest cohort of international students in the UK. It also discusses how the results might help policymakers and university practitioners engage with policies and international students. The chapter further shifts students' perspectives towards the discussion of the impact of market practice towards the HE sector, which further presents the implication of this study. Finally, the chapter presents the limitation and details further research focus.

## Chapter 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Introduction

Neoliberal ideologies and market philosophies have been applied to higher education in many countries (Sidhu, 2005). In the UK, market-driven approaches are adopted to increase HEIs' competitive advantage as the whole sector faces fierce funding competition (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Jabbar et al, 2017). The position of students as consumers has been legitimated in public policy, which accelerates changes within the UK higher education sector, such as funding and tuition reforms and university governance. Enhancing student-consumer satisfaction has become a focus of HEIs to address the competition (Carey, 2013). Although the market logic has gradually expanded into the social and political spheres (Koris et al, 2015) and the student-as-consumer has become a social and legitimated category in UK society, much hostility and criticisms of these ideologies emerged from many scholars (Bunce et al, 2022; Naidoo & Whitty, 2013). The concerns about the negative impacts of consumerism are from students' expectations of their academic performance to academic integrity. Therefore, the debate and controversy about student-as-consumer in higher education have gone on for many years (Vuori, 2013; Naidoo & Whitty, 2013; Guilbault, 2018), and even the regulator Office for Students admits that the identity remains contested (OfS, 2023a). In addition, there is a lack of empirical research proving that students reposition themselves as consumers towards their higher education (Brooks & Abrahams, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017).

This chapter provides the context of the debate and identify the gap in international student's absence in the debate. To do so, section 2.2 begins by analysing the political context for British HE reforms in the last three decades by analysing four modification aspects. Firstly, the massification of HE is considered an influencing factor where the government has to seek other financial resources to continue its ambition for a mass system during an economic recession. Secondly, neoliberalism is adopted to marketise university activities and assure the quality of HE. Thirdly, students being empowered as consumers coincided with the tuition reforms. Students' experience and feedback are emphasised within governmental policies. Fourthly, institutional restructurings under a new form of management are examined to reflect a culture of accountability and performativity within the academic community. Reviewing relevant literature assists in understanding the narrative development of consumerist approaches to higher education in the UK (in England). Section 2.3 further focuses on the UK's international HE marketisation push by

reviewing the UK government's international education strategies and policies, marketing and branding in the past three decades. By detailed discussion of these three aspects, a clear consumerist agenda and free-market logic within international education are provided as the basis for inviting international students to join the discussion and offer their perspectives on marketisation and consumerism as they are positioned at the frontline of the execution of these policies. Section 2.4 firstly explores higher education quality assurance processes, agencies and regulations to reflect on the implications of neoliberal ideology on the university's governance and faculty. The section then explores global university rankings to identify the technical aspects and the deeper political, social and economic forces witnessed within a proliferation of university rankings. Finally, the section presents how students engage with these tangible and intangible qualities and quality assurance systems. Therefore, a further understanding of how neoliberal ideology is perpetuated from top to bottom within higher education is provided. Section 2.5 provides an overview of the academic debate on whether students can be considered consumers and whether higher education is a business. Section 2.6 reviews the current literature on students' perceptions of HE consumerism and student-consumer identity with a further review of the construction of contemporary HE students. The section also identifies that international students' voice is absent from the debate, and their understanding of the subject is underrepresented and therefore underlines the necessity of conducting this study. Section 2.7 provides the theoretical perspectives around identity and social identity. The relations between identity theory and education are discussed. The section further explores the common social identities associated with university students and international students. A summary is provided to conclude the literature review.

## **2.2 A changing higher education with a neoliberal agenda**

In the past two decades, HE in the UK has experienced some significant transformation due to the neoliberal agenda and marketisation (Silverio et al, 2021). The sector has changed from a small elite group to a mass sector (Trow, 2007; Bennett, 2021), from a public service of a welfare state (e.g., no tuition fees between 1960 and 1997) to a private service of a neoliberal society; from a prized autonomous system to a sector 'regulated' by market mechanisms and state interventions (Shattock & Horvath, 2020). A significant transformation is that students have been repositioned as consumers who are the beneficiaries and share the cost of education (Brown & Carasso, 2013). With this political justification, the tuition fee regime has been reformed dramatically under different government periods. The role of government has become a co-funding partner and a gatekeeper of students' consumer rights by imposing regulations on teaching and research of the

institutions. The teaching and research funding allocation has relied increasingly on calculability and competition. The academic community has faced an unprecedented era of performativity and marketisation of HE (Ball, 2012). Consumerism has permeated institutional and academic internal governance structures.

### **2.2.1 Massification of HE**

Massification is associated with a significant expansion of HE in the world. ‘Mass HE’ refers to over 15% enrolment of school leaver age cohort, which only happened in the industrialised nations from around 1990 (Trow, 1973). Before 1980, no country had more than a 50% HE participation rate, while 56 countries reached that rate in 2014, and another 56 countries entered the massification level, which reached from 15% to 50% (UNESCO, 2017). The Gross Tertiary Enrolment Rate (GTER) of all high-income and most middle-income countries are approaching or near 50%. The GTER in East Asia, except China, has exceeded 50%, while China maintains rapid growth (Marginson, 2016). In South Korea, the GTER rose from 7.2% in 1971 to 98.4% in 2012 (UNESCO, 2015). While there are gaps in sub-Saharan Africa or slow growth in countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, the central expansion tendency becomes a global norm and keeps increasing towards a universal level. In 2021, there was an estimated 220 million students (The World Bank, 2021) in about 25,000 institutions around the world (Bouchrika, 2022).

In the UK, higher education was an elite system, publicly funded for a smaller group of students (Ingleby, 2015). In 1960/61, according to the Greenaway Report (Greenaway & Haynes, 2000), the HE Age Participation (API) showed only 5% of the school-leaving population (under age 21) went to university and the number tripled by 1987/1988 and increased six times to reach 30% in 1993/1994 (Mayhew et al, 2004). The Department of Education published the HE Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) data, including all cohorts aged 18 to 30 from 2006/07 to 2017/18. The HEIPR was 41.8% in 2006/07 and rose to 50.2% in 2017/18 (DfE, 2019). The university expansion has two peak phases, one in the 1960s and the other around the 1990s (Mayhew et al, 2004). The Robbins Report (1963) recommended an expansion of universities as the post-war country needed skilled labour desperately, and the demand of the age groups could not be met with the university’s scale (Robbins, 1963). With the advice of the University Grants Committee, seven more universities were approved to be established at Sussex, Norwich, York, Canterbury, Colchester, Coventry and Lancaster and some university colleges were empowered to full degree-giving (Robbins, 1963). The latest data from Universities UK shows 170 HE institutions with 2.66 million (0.59 million international students) students in the UK in 2020/21 (Universities UK, 2022).

A substantial difference between the two expansion waves is the public funding allowance. The first phase was considered well-funded, while the second was not (Mayhew et al, 2004). In the 1960s and 1970s, English universities had their golden years of governmental support, with around 90% of institutions' costs on teaching, research and administration funded by the government (Robbins, 1963). The golden years are characterised as having:

- (a) reasonably generous governmental support to HE (universities and polytechnics), protected and buffered from governmental intrusion by the former publicly created but largely autonomous University Grants Committee; (b) no tuition fees (and none then in prominent sight); and (c) relatively generous means-tested mandatory grants enjoyed by most students and theoretically sufficient (along with the means-tested expected parental contributions) to permit students to live without the need for either part-time employment or loans (Johnstone, 2005, p.13).

The introduction of tuition fees signalled the end of the golden period. The Dearing Report (1997) aimed to cope with the financial crisis due to mass expansion. However, it was regarded as one of the most striking indications of marketisation (Brown, 2015; Bennett, 2021).

### **2.2.2 Neoliberalism and marketisation**

While researchers consider that massification shows a continued universal trend, how to maintain a system with good quality and sustainable funding becomes a question. While countries such as the USA and Australia have adopted market principles to ease the financial pressure of massification of HE in the past three decades, HE in most Western European countries has been funded mainly by the government and free from market pressures until lately (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Overall, it is a worldwide tendency for the state shares the funding responsibility of HE with parents, students and philanthropists (Johnstone, 2005). England was the first case in Europe to practice market logic in the HE system (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). The Thatcher government deployed neoliberal ideologies to reform public sectors, which included public transport, housing and education, so that the cost of these services could be offloaded from the public purse (Lynch, 2006).

Neoliberalism refers to:

in the first instance, a theory of political, and economic practices proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2005, p.2).

According to Olssen and Peters (2005), neoliberals reform public sectors with these main philosophies: (a) individualism, which promotes each individual as a competitive entrepreneur who can be the best judge of his/her own needs and interests and maximise economic benefits; (b) marketisation, which believes the market is the best route to allocate resources and opportunities effectively compared with other mechanisms; (c) deregulation, which only allows the state to intervene in situations where individual rights needed to be protected; (d) free trade without barriers. These logics drive universities and students to maximise their benefits by competing for funding with other institutions and requiring value for money from the university, respectively. Neoliberalism enforces a positive role on the state to influence the market with conditions and to assure its operation. HE is encouraged to act more like an enterprise with business thinking and practices (Maringe, 2005). The imperatives for a university business to succeed are to provide 'great customer satisfaction; to measure 'academic productivity'; to demonstrate 'value-added teaching'; to increase 'competitive capacity', and to minimise cost (Collini, 2012). In neoliberalism, competition is a primary objective to achieve within HE reform. The aim of promoting competition within the system is to improve quality by increasing productivity and accountability (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Marginson (1997) illustrates that.

(i) increased competition is meant to increase responsiveness, flexibility and rates of innovation ... increase the diversity of what is produced and can be chosen ... enhance productive and allocative efficiency ... improve the quality and volume of production ... as well as strengthen accountability to students, employers and government... internationalisation, fiscal reduction and university–business links...an imagined line of causation from competition to consumer sovereignty to better efficiency and quality that is the virtuous ideal glowing at the core of microeconomic reform in HE (p.5).

The market-driven system attempts to assure quality through competition. The introduction of state arm's length regulatory agents aims to increase the institution's responsiveness towards the market's needs and consumers' interests. The government continues increasing its control within the HE sector by imposing regulations on core activities (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2014). The

funding councils was seen as stimulation to expand political engagement in HE (Palfreyman & Temple, 2017). The University Grants Committee (UGC) was a funding and coordinating body for the universities until 1989. The Committee was comprised of senior academics and mitigated between HEIs and the government (Shattock & Horvath, 2020). The UGC owned a high autonomy in relation to the Treasury and the Department of Education and Science (DfES) (Sidhu, 2005). In the UGC days before the Thatcher cuts, universities and academic communities held full power. In the early 1980s, the committee had to respond to the then government's initiative of reducing public funding under the inspection of DfES and parliament (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2014), and the Treasury compounded it into the Government's Comprehensive Spending Reviews (Shattock, 2012). The funding council (in England) has been replaced with a new single market regulator: the Office for Students in 2016.

### **2.2.2.1 The Office for Student (OfS)**

The White Paper: Success as Knowledge Economy in 2016 (BIS, 2016) announced two new regulators to replace ten arm's length Government agents: the Office for Students (OfS) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The OfS is a new regulator for the institutions with students' best interest, and it claims that "almost everything the OfS does is about ensuring value for money in English HE" (OfS, 2019). The market regulator declares to help student-consumers achieve value for money and improve HE teaching quality and graduate employability (ibid.). Thus, the OfS becomes a key part of the consumerist landscape. The OfS, in name and intention, mimics a set of older market regulatory bodies which were established to oversee privatised formerly-public industries (e.g., water, telecommunications, energy – OfWat, Ofcom and Ofgen, respectively). Another important body is the CMA – the Competition and Markets Authority, which aims to ensure fair competition, prevent monopolies and market rigging, and enforce fair advertising. OfS conceptualised students as consumers explicitly in its policy and document (Brooks, 2018; Competition and Markets Authority, 2023).

These governmental regulation implementations have witnessed massive changes within the UK HE sector over the past two decades. The HE system has become highly marketised with the characteristics such as plurality and competition, increasing consumerism and robust institutional audit (Lowrie & Hemsley-Brown, 2011). The Student for Office is the "consumer-focused market regulator" (BIS, 2016), typifying a marketised agenda on UK HE and the government's desire to measure and govern the HE system with market-like performance metrics (Williamson, 2019).



Accompanying the demand and emphasis on student-consumer status and student consumers' rights, consumerism within HE has arguably increased significantly.

### **2.2.3 The rise of consumerism**

The notion of students as consumers of HE first appeared in the USA in 1970 as tuition fees rose and financial support was reduced (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). During a similar period, the UK Thatcher government started privatising the public service sectors, and consumer discourse emerged in political papers related to students in HE. Successive governments continued to marketise its HE sector and promoted the concept of students as consumers to an official policy discourse (Tomlinson, 2017). The main political logic underpinning the discourse is that students should share the cost of education as they are the beneficiaries. The claim facilitates the transfer of funding responsibility from the state to students (Carpentier, 2012; Slaughter & Leslie, 2004). The rationales reinforcing students' choices are that universities need to provide sufficient information and demonstrate quality for students, parents and taxpayers. The government envisions that the overall university quality can be improved by students who are with finance responsibilities to demand a high-quality education through market competition (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). In marketisation, student tuition fee reforms are significant and prolonged under government intervention (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2014).

#### **2.2.3.1 Student tuition fee reforms**

In 1997, the Dearing Report recommended that the then Labour government consider students as cost contributors, recommending a fee of £1,000 to be paid by means of a graduate tax (Frank et al, 2019). The government then introduced a 'top-up fee' of £1,000 with a loan to be paid on an income-contingent basis, replaced maintenance grants for home and EU students (ibid.). In 2003, the government's white paper, the Future of Higher Education and the Higher Education Act 2004, continued to reform the tuition regime. Near all universities increased tuition fees to £3,000 per year under the reform (ibid.). In 2009, the White Paper Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy and the Browne Report of 2010 shifted the debate from how to increase participation to how to improve quality by introducing a market and competition (Frank et al, 2019). The report was considered to make a significant difference compared with Robbins and Dearing and was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS). Under the report, the government set an upper limit on fees at £9,000 instead of Browne's recommendation of £6,000, rising to over £9,000 with other conditions.

The Coalition government published the White Paper: Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011). Since Browne's Report was passed from the Labour government to the new Coalition government (2010 – 2015), no major reform is associated with the paper. Instead, it emphasises students' autonomy, experience and feedback. The Coalition Government claimed to put 'students at the heart of the system' and tried to reshape the system and empower students with political consumer rights. Universities have been required to commit value for money and satisfaction for students. The reconceptualised student as consumer is accelerated by the White paper: Students at the Heart of the System requires HE provision to provide students and prospective students with more transparent information about the courses, graduate salary data, and where tuition funds have been spent. Students' feedback is valued in the White Paper significantly. All final-year undergraduates are asked through the National Student Survey (NSS) their views on teaching quality and learning experience (BIS, 2011). The results of NSS provide feedback to the institutions and the government and are claimed to improve students' academic engagement (BIS, 2011). The tuition fee reforms by the successive government have positioned students as rational and influential consumers (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2014).

### **2.2.3.2 Tuition fee as a catalyst for students being consumers**

Many academics considered that the tuition reforms accelerated the normalisation of students as consumers (Jabbar et al, 2017; Nxion et al, 2018). Firstly, the government shifts the responsibility of funding universities to students who are assumed to achieve private benefits from using the degrees as positional goods to have better career prospects and economic return (Judson & Taylor, 2014). Therefore, more regulations are placed on the universities to see students as consumers and to see themselves as service provider to meet student-consumers' needs, for example, positive employment outcomes (ibid.) There are many criticisms of HEIs positioning themselves as service providers. For example, Bunce & Bennett (2019) argue that HEIs should avoid treating themselves as service providers to prevent students from feeling entitled to having a degree due to the tuition fee they pay. Instead, the authors suggest that promoting the idea of HEIs is better, offering students a precious chance to grow personally and intellectually. A university's purpose includes providing students with lifelong and societal benefits. Secondly, some research shows that students position themselves as consumers primarily due to the tuition fee. For example, Brooks & Abrahams (2021) note that students expressed the inevitability of being consumers due to paying tuition fees. The finding from Gupta et al (2023) also indicates that students who paid more were highly likely to expect better employment outcomes. Students studying Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths (STEM) subjects and bearing higher fee responsibility also are shown to

express a higher consumer orientation (Bunce et al, 2017). The sense of entitlement from students and the priority of students' satisfaction led to more complaints in England (Bunce et al, 2022). The expectation of good value for money and a high level of satisfaction stands in opposition to making an intellectual effort to achieve a degree (Bunce et al, 2022; Tomlinson, 2017). Aligning with the finding of Bunce et al (2017), students paying more positively associated with a higher consumer orientation, which further leads to lower academic performance.

Against the above popular opinion, Williams (2013) points out that students expressed conflicting views towards their identity. The author disagrees with the positive correlation between consumerism and tuition fees. Instead, the social, economic and political attitudes have transformed students' perception of the purpose of HE. However, her argument is based on students who paid £3250 without experiencing the subsequent fee increases.

#### **2.2.4 New Public Management and commercialisation of academics**

Ball (2012) states that “neoliberalism gets into our minds and our souls, into how we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others” (p.17). The author argues that marketisation impacts his academic life in every aspect, as stated above. Ball's complaint is one example of academics' reactions towards neoliberal reform within HE. The main characters he described within the HE reform can be referred to as a 'new' form of management conducted by the government with market logic. The HE sector is analogised to business thinking which pursues profit from selling and buying education services. The academic practice has arguably been commodified with universities getting involved with financial planning and business adventures.

'New Public Management' (NPM) is commonly used to refer to the restructuring of HE by the government in neoliberalism (Hood, 2000). The UK government in the 1980s was influenced by economic perspectives on public services and was advised by think tanks such as the Institute for Economic Affairs. NPM has been practised within public administration and management in the UK since Thatcher's public sector reform (McLaughlin et al, 2002). Therefore, NPM has been applied to the English HE to reinvent the governance of HE. Thatcherism considered the old form of management ineffective and inefficient (Smith et al, 2007) and distrusted the 'professional cadre' (Kirkpatrick et al, 2005, p.3).

The 1988 Education Reform Act 1987 abolished academic tenure and was replaced by contractual teaching funding (Brown & Carasso, 2013). These actions have adjusted the traditional

conceptions of professionalism, which include a permanent status to secure academic freedom and autonomy, free from financial pressures. Olssen & Peters (2005) argue that within NPM, academics' power and rights have been established on contracts based on measurable outputs. Professionalism in the 1990s experienced an unprecedented era of political intervention, such as establishing the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the Teaching Excellence Framework. Teaching and research have been linked to funding where the UK government requires proof from institutions to demonstrate the quality of teaching and research outputs.

#### **2.2.4.1 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)**

The TEF was introduced in 2016 to inspect and improve the teaching quality in English universities as the then Minister of Universities and Science, David Willetts, asserted teaching was “by far the weakest aspect of English HE”. The government thus introduced the TEF with the expectation of driving up the quality of teaching by encouraging more competition (BIS, 2016). Although TEF is recognised as a form to acknowledge the value of teaching as the core aspect of HE, especially as research has arguably been placed as the main priority, it is also seen as a tool used by the government to place unprecedented scrutiny over the staff and instrumentalise the teaching and learning as a product (O’Leary & Cui, 2018). Regulators link quality of teaching to funding which proposes greater competition among institutions to achieve a ‘visible’ outcome of excellence in teaching (O’Leary, 2017). In return, some universities apply the result of TEF to brand their teaching ‘excellence’ and hopefully to recruit more students, further reinforcing the market forces behind TEF.

TEF is also criticised for transforming academics into ‘governable subjects’ (Davies & Petersen, 2005, p.93). Olssen & Peters (2005) also argue that academic audits have changed the traditional institutional culture of open intellectual debate to Lyotard’s concept of ‘performativity’. There are two order effects of performativity: (a) pedagogical and scholarly activities are likely to be reoriented towards areas where immediate, measurable performance can be achieved rather than the aspect of the social, emotional and other moral development which is hard to measure; (b) the main HE activities teaching, and research are contracted into calculability instead of academics’ inner passion and commitment (Ball, 2012).

This section has provided the context of the marketisation of UK higher education through reviewing and analysing government’s policy and document. The neoliberal agenda and market forces have significantly influenced the HE system. The drastic tuition fee reforms accelerating

government to position students as consumers and reconfigure HEIs as service providers. The rising consumerism and the increasing scrutiny are followed by commercialisation of academics and changing traditional institutional culture.

## **2.3 International education marketisation**

With a provided framework of a highly increasing market-driven UK HE system discussed in the last section, this section shifts focus on UK's international education policy and market push globally. The aim is to review the international education policy and strategy to understand further how international students are constructed.

### **2.3.1 International education strategies and international student policies**

This section aims to examine British international student policy closely to achieve a better understanding of the political context of what international students mean to the UK and its HE sector. The term 'international student' corresponds to government policies which distinguish 'international' from 'home' students in terms of immigration restriction, tuition fee differences and the accessibility of public funding and other support (Merrick, 2013).

The trajectory of international student policy development in the UK is considered as moving from 'aid' to 'trade' and to 'internationalisation' (Smart & Ang, 1993). The host country's interests are the thread running through all the phases (Merrick, 2013). From the colonial era to the post-colonial period, the form of scholarships and support offered by the British Council and the Overseas Development Administration was considered a foreign aid policy mainly for political impacts (Walker, 2014). Due to UK economic stagnation in the 1970s, the growing numbers of international students arriving to study, heavily subsidised by the British taxpayer, caused financial concern. Hence, the Thatcher government made a significant turning point, abolishing the subsidy for international students in 1980. It signalled the end of the UK's imperial goodwill or aid to its Commonwealth and other developing countries. At this point, England was one of the earliest countries to take this approach. In contrast, some European countries continue to offer very low costs to international students, and other changes have been very recent, such as Sweden and Finland.

Following Thatcher's neoliberal ideology of marketing public sectors, higher education started as a marketable asset on its 'trade' journey. Successive governments continued accelerating British education into the global marketplace, and international students are gradually positioned as

economic subjects. The Blair government completely shifted from aid to trade with two Prime Minister's Initiatives from 1999 to 2011. The decade had witnessed HE international student numbers surge and a well-known Education UK brand. The UK has remained international students' second most popular study destination for over two decades. The succeeding coalition government (the Conservative party + the Liberal Democrats) had the same economic interests of branding and exporting UK education overseas, which was included under their 'Britain is GREAT' campaign. However, the coalition government placed the UK in a weaker position in the global marketplace as its immigration policy flagged an unwelcome message to international students by counting student numbers into net immigration (Universities UK, 2014).

In 2013, the coalition government issued *International Education: Global Growth and Prosperity*, also commonly known as *International Education Strategy*, which was considered the first formal national, international student policy (Lomer, 2018). The government clarified that there were some misunderstandings about the UK's immigration policy towards international students and that the UK holds a welcome attitude without an intention to cap the international student numbers. Although the total number of international students increased since 2011, it is considered as stagnation compared to other exporting nations. The government published an *International Education Strategy: global potential, global growth*, which sets an explicit numerical target to generate annual export revenue 35 billion pounds with hosting 600,000 HE students, both by 2030, with changes of immigration policies such as the reintroduction of Post Study Working Visa and Point-based Immigration system. The hosting number reached 605,130 in 2020/21, which met the target of 600,000 a decade earlier than 2030 (HESA, 2022), and the economic contribution of the international students (2018/19 cohort) to the UK was estimated at close to £29 billion (UUKi, 2022a). China, as the top domicile of international students in the UK, sent 141,475 students to the UK in 2020/21 (UUKi, 2022b).

From the outset of constructing international student policy in the 1990s until now, the rationales of whether the UK should recruit more international students are fundamental (Lomer, 2018). Migration policy plays a drastic role in deciding international student numbers. Although governments keep emphasising that they welcome international students, immigration policy is formed primarily by the Home Office and implemented by the UK Border Agency (UKBA: now it has been renamed and replaced as UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) in 2013). Attitudes towards the number of international students shift occasionally, and it is hard to see a united direction across all departments. For example, Post-Study Work (PSW) visas were abolished by

the UK government in 2012 but re-introduced in 2021 under a new name: the Graduate Route. Compared to the general international student policy, institutions and students are more affected by immigration policy. Universities are generally harmonised with governments' direction on marketing higher education overseas and recruiting more international students but conflict with the Home Office when it tightens the immigration policy of international students (the Guardian, 2022).

### **2.3.1.1 The end of aid phase**

British public funding heavily subsidised international students in the post-colonial era. There was no specific international policy on the national level; instead, the subsidy was considered a tradition and was rarely questioned (Walker, 2014). Harris (1995) points out two reasons which encumbered the development of official international student policy, which were “governmental reservations about constructing a policy based on ‘propaganda in peacetime’” (Wallace, 1981, p.79) and universities of the time had full autonomy to control admissions.

There were 27,500 overseas higher education students in 1960, and the numbers continued to grow, attracting the public and the government's attention on its economic burden (Walker, 2014). The Robbins report in 1963 offered a realistically estimated cost of annual subsidy of £9 million for overseas students but defended its merits as a form of foreign aid weighed against other competing policy options (Robbins, 1963). The reform for international tuition fees started two decades earlier than for home students. In 1969, the Labour Government introduced a £250 differential fee for international students with intentions to amend public spending and limit growth of international students (Walker, 2014). As the differential fee was well below cost (Brown & Carasso, 2013) and the belief of students that British education was the best and superior to the rest of the world (Walker, 2014), the numbers kept increasing. With the neoliberal ideologies of marketised and privatised public services, the Thatcher government deliberated British higher education as a marketable asset. Thus, it revoked the subsidy of around £100 million per year on higher education provision for international students in 1980. All overseas students that started in 1980/81 were required to pay a total cost fee for higher and further education in the UK. The recommended fees for the following overseas students increased by about 300 per cent (Williams, 1987). The tuition reform was criticised by many parties such as some institutions which considered that it was liberal bilateralism that overseas students offered the system intellectually and culturally what they took out financially (Harris, 1995). Commonwealth countries such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia had protested to question Britain's open policy. The tension made the

government concede by excluding EU students and introducing an overseas postgraduate research scheme to enable them to study at the same fee level as home students (Lomer, 2018). In the meantime, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) introduced the Pym Package<sup>1</sup> scholarship scheme, and a Chevening Scholarship programme was a part of the Pym Package to mitigate the backlash of the full cost fee (Perraton, 2009).

### **2.3.1.2 The start of trade phase**

The dimension of international students as commercial interests started in the late 1980s when the Thatcher Government began reinventing higher education by cutting its funding and encouraging competition and marketing. The introduction of full-cost fees for international students signalled the shift from the ‘aid’ to the ‘trade’ phase of international education. During the period of financial austerity, UK universities seized the opportunity to recruit more international students as an unconstrained income source and eventually the sector complied with the government to pursue the global market share of international students (Merrick, 2013).

### **Prime Minister’s Initiative 1999-2005 (PMI1)**

Prime Minister Tony Blair launched the Prime Minister’s Initiative (PMI) in June 1999. PMI is considered to have broken previous silence on internationalisation of higher education and international student affairs (Lomer, 2018; Walker, 2014). It is the outset of forming specific political policies and commitments associated with international student recruitment and envisaging the enormous economic impact of this education.

The Prime Minister set a specific target to host 75,000 more international students in higher and further education (Blair, 1999). His main reasons behind the initiative were: first, people who have studied in Britain are bonded to the country, which improves the UK’s international trade and promotes British diplomacy; second, the economic impact of education is significant; third, institutions and home students will benefit from the world’s epitome of international student presence in British classrooms (Blair, 1999). Four national strategies were launched to achieve the aim of placing the UK as international students’ number one choice for education and hospitality: a more accessible immigration system for students to apply and enter; a more professional

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<sup>1</sup> “Mr Francis Pym, then Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, announces that the government has decided to increase its support for overseas students with the establishment of an international scholarship programme” (Chevening, 2023, 9 17).



marketing mechanism featuring a new UK Education Brand, more transparent and accessible information and the British Council as the ‘right-hand man’; a right for international students to work alongside their study; and expanded Chevening scholarship opportunities for international students (Blair, 1999). Within the first stage of the PMI from 1999 to 2005, the target of attracting 75,000 more higher education students was achieved with an extra 43,000 students by 2005 (Blair, 2006). Apart from the statistical successes, the brand of Education UK has been built, which is a united identity of the country and the HE sector to promote globally (Education UK will be discussed in more detail later).

### **2.3.1.3 Internationalisation**

Merrick (2013) suggests that ‘aid’, ‘trade and ‘internationalisation’ co-exist but are active at different phases. While PMI 1 started to mention that the presence of international students internationalises British lecture rooms, the phase is the start of trading higher education globally. The second phase of PMI 1, the Prime Minister’s Initiative for International Education, transferred British education to the internationalisation phase. The phase focused more on the aspects of internationalisation where education benefits from mobile students by providing diverse experiences, skills and global perspectives which benefit home students and institutions (Merrick, 2013).

### **Prime Minister’s Initiative for International Education 2006-2011(PMI2)**

At the launch speech of PMI 2 in 2006, prime minister Tony Blair praised the universities’ hard work to “sell the opportunities and benefits of studying in the UK” to complete the target of PMI 1 (Blair, 2006). However, more work was urged to deepen British global links and compete with other nations in a growing global higher education market. Therefore, he set another goal: recruiting 100,000 more international students to the UK by 2011 (Blair, 2006). The government proposed to devote £7 million to enhance international students’ experience and grow the partnerships between domestic and overseas institutions (Blair, 2006). The initiative continued to the same rationale of the PMI1 that home students and the national economy will benefit from more international students coming in. However, it started to envisage higher education as the fundamental element to embrace the opportunities and meet the challenges of globalisation in the 21st century (Blair, 2006).

### **International Education Strategy: global growth and prosperity (IES 2013)**

The first coalition government published the first International Education Strategy in 2013 (DBIS & DfE, 2013a). An Accompanying Analytical Narrative was released at the same time (DBIS & DfE, 2013b). The strategy classifies education into the export industry and objects to increasing the export income of education. Repeating some rationales of PMI 1&2, the strategy envisioned international education as an excellent opportunity for Britain, and the government dedicated the strategy and plan to take advantage of it. International students studying in the UK accounted for 75% of the education export income and contribute to the growth of economy significantly (DBIS & DfE, 2013a). The DBIS & DfE (2013a) proposed to increase international students with a 15-20% growth rate from 2013 to 2018.

Compared with the PMI initiatives, the IES 2013 emphasised there were some misconceptions about student immigration policy and affirmed that “there is no cap on the number of students who can come to study in the UK and no intention to introduce one” (DBIS & DfE, 2013a, p.37). However, there was no sign of any change in the post-study work opportunities for international students who study undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The exception was that all PhD graduates are allowed to have one year to work in the UK after a doctorate completion. There are an additional 1,000 visas available for MBA students to extend their visas for a year.

### **International Education Strategy: global potential, global growth (IES 2019)**

The strategy was published by the Department of Education and Industry and Trade in March 2019. The strategy opens with an ambition to embrace a broader opportunity for the education sector after the UK leave the European Union (DfE & DIT, 2019). The strategy states that UK education has not reached its full global export potential and has faced difficulties in the path of increasing its international blueprint. The government is about to help the education sector to solve these issues and set a specific target which is “to increase the value of our education exports to 35 billion pounds per year and students hosted in the UK to 600,000 per year, both by 2030” (DfE & DIT, 2019, para.1&2).

#### **2.3.1.4 Immigration policy**

Immigration policy is often intimately bound up with student mobility policy (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Arguments for and against increasing the number of international students are closely associated with migration policy. In the past two decades, the British immigration policy has gone back and forth between welcoming and not welcoming international students. In 1999, the proof

of 'intention to leave' after completing the studies for a student visa was revoked. Several schemes, such as the Science and Engineering Scheme, International Graduate Scheme, and finally, Post Study Work, offered international students the chance to work after graduation (Merrick, 2013). During the period of PMI 2, migration policy revised the employment regulations, which allowed international students to work while they were studying. The visa application system was targeted to be simplified for talented students but to prevent abuse. A Points-Based System consisting of five tiers was established in 2008 by Home Office to "increase the skills and knowledge base of the UK by quantifying qualifications, experience and income, and correlating this with labour market needs" (Lomer, 2018, p.62). In the meantime, there was a scandal of 'bogus colleges' in which some colleges got students into the country for illegal employment, not for real study in 2008 (UKBA, 2008). Therefore, the Gordon Brown Government called for a review of the Tier 4 student visa to prevent 'bogus colleges and students' from abusing the immigration system in 2009 (UKBA, 2010).

As universities have the right to decide overseas student tuition fees, the only obstacle for them to grow large international institutions is the number of students they can recruit. Immigration policy can create conflict between the government and the institutions. The Conservative party turned to decrease the hundreds of thousands of immigrants to tens of thousands in a manifesto commitment in 2011, and international students were proposed to be counted in the net migration. In April 2011, the Lib-Con coalition government overhauled the visa system by abolishing the Post Work Visa for international graduates (UKBA 2011). Agents and universities usually need to prove the economic impact of international students on a relaxed visa system. Universities UK represents over 100 universities across four countries in the UK and consists of the vice-chancellors as its members. It has published a sequence of reports to lobby the government about international student immigration policies since 2011. Institutions were anxious about the sustainability of postgraduate taught courses and substantial drops in overall numbers (Universities UK, 2012). In the last decade, Universities UK has devoted itself to achieving a moderate, loose immigration policy for international students and academics and has demonstrated how institutions are keen on reaching their potential in the growing export market and how much economic benefit international students bring into the UK.

The net migration target of 100,000 including international students concerned the higher education sector not only because it shows a less welcome attitude towards the international student but also because further restrictions will be put on to limit the number of students if the

target means to meet. There is no need to include international students in the government's target of limiting net migration to 100,000 per year, as students are commonly seen as temporary visitors, not immigrants (House of Commons, 2018). "They come, they study, and they go", argued the Universities UK (2012). The debate on capping the number of international students resurfaced in 2022 (Margotin, 2022). The current government, led by Rishi Sunak, plans to regulate international student numbers to reduce "low-quality" degrees and immigration statistics (The Guardian, 2022). The proposal attracted concerns related to numerous universities' economic impact (Margotin, 2022). The net migration number in 2023 is over 700,000 to the UK, which causes concerns for the current government. The Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, commits to reducing immigration to "tens of thousands" (Syal, 2023). The latest strategy to reduce the number is place limitations on overseas students bringing dependants to the UK, except those who study the research programmes (ibid.)

Security is another object of migration policy. The Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) was introduced by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2013. Any prospective postgraduate student whose nationality is outside the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland needs an ATAS certificate to study certain subjects which contain technologies with a potential for use in nuclear, chemical or biological weapons development in the UK (FCO, 2013).

### **2.3.2 Marketing and branding**

This section reviews how the UK markets and brands its HEIs overseas. The current focus is based on the Education UK Brand and the non-profit and non-governmental public organisations: the British Council and the Universities UK. Marketing and marketisation are fundamentally different (Lowrite & Hemsley-Brown, 2021). The authors point out that it is obvious to observe the implementation of marketing strategy on international student recruitment. However, the research on international student recruitment within UK HE marketisation remains under researched.

#### **2.3.2.1 The Education UK brand**

The creation and development of the Education UK brand play a vital role in taking British education to the stage of internationalisation. The distinctive feature of the brand is like an umbrella which covers a country's values and culture and adheres to prestigious higher education institutions. The brand signals the outset of processing and marketing UK higher education worldwide. The British Council (1999) sells the brand as "a dynamic tradition; the new world-class;

being the best I (international students) can be” and is “responsive; welcoming; alive with possibilities” (p.1). The brand is also disseminated to counteract misconceptions about UK education (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). According to Lomer et al (2018), higher education in the UK is conceived as expansive, less friendly than in Australia and less innovative than in the United States. Marketing activities, including alumni campaigns, education fairs, and professional development practices, are organised to brand a competitive identity where education in the UK is seen as the best. At the stage of PMI2, the overseas marketing focused on re-branding the quality of student experience and the value of qualifications (British Council, 2010).

Creating the Education UK brand is considered an effective national strategy to attract more international students. However, Education UK also attracts some resistance and criticism. Branding is anathema to higher education: it implies central control and consistency, whereas universities have to be about freedom and action. Lewis (2003) argues that universities have too much personality to be branded as a business. Gibbs (2002) contests that international markets in higher education have commoditised education, almost without questioning the appropriateness of business models of competition. Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana (2007) argue that recruiting more international students and ensuring institutions’ financial sustainability might justify universities’ drive to consolidate the co-branding model with the British Council. In spite of this, it may be concerning to see the erosion of the identities of individual faculties and schools. The authors further comment that a cohesive identity provides assumptions for international students to each signal institution and faculty. The individual entity may face a challenge to retain its originality under the ‘education business’ brand.

### **2.3.2.2 British Council and Universities UK**

The British Council plays a significant role to put the policy into practice. It is a non-profit and non-governmental public corporation but aligns with the government’s ideology and conducts international strategies. The British Council receives government aid from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and considers guidance issued by the FCO. It functions like a central operation that works with the governments meanwhile grows partnerships with sending countries and providing ‘after-sale service’ for international students.

The British Council led the governance of the PMI 1 with four government departments (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Education and Employment, Trade and Industry, Ministry of Defence) and Scottish and Welsh Office (Lomer, 2018). Furthermore, it closely engaged in national

strategies to promote the brand of 'Education UK' and 'Britain is Great' (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Its English examination: the English Language Test System (IELTS) is the first threshold overseas students need to achieve concerning studying in the UK as the wide acceptance of the report within the international education system, especially in the higher education sector. It has a multimillion-pound annual turnover by selling its English examination and course service (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Over three million participants attended IELTS in 2017 (IELTS, 2017) which not only bring substantial revenue but also collect valuable market data about prospective students such as their education background, the aim of taking the test and desirable study destinations.

Institutions are content to work with the British Council. The British Council provides a platform for universities to compete more effectively on the global market by participating in research activities, attending overseas events and exhibitions, and participating in recruitment fairs (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). For example, in 2018, the University of Reading won a contract to design and develop an online course for the British Council to equip international students coming to the UK for the first time to prepare for English university academic life and successfully transition to study and live in the UK. The University Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Global Engagement at the University of Reading spoke to the press that the university feels proud to develop the course to support international students and the present UK to the world as a welcoming destination for international students. British Council's GREAT Britain Campaign Director, Fiona Samson, praised the online course as a multilateral benefit for over forty thousand incoming international students, institutions, and the reputation of UK as a study education (Premium Official News, 2018).

From the Blair government with two PMIs until the current government with two IESs, the governmental policies have been developed and improved with clear targets and strategies. The international students are constructed as source of income to the nation, the HE sector and the individuals. Their role of economic benefit to the UK must be evidence-based and understood, as Universities UK International argued (UUKi, 2021a). The following figures provide the proof:

Every part of the UK is financially better off – on average by £390 per person – because of international students. The economic benefit of this cohort to the UK is calculated to be £28.8 billion, while the costs are found to be £2.9 billion. (London Economics, 2021; UUKi, 2021a)

This section has examined the UK international student policies and documents to reveal the development of international students as an income resource and economic subjects. The economic benefits of international student recruitment are highly focused, followed by specific strategies and marketing plans. The immigration rules placed on international students and the debate around the number of international students allowed in the UK show that international students are vulnerable. Although it is recognisable as problematic to position overseas students as cash cows (Mittelmeier & Sylvie, 2021), the narratives of economic benefits are highly associated with the group of students, as shown above. The existence of international students is equalled to revenue to the government and the institutions. The narratives of consumer position and rights are completely missed in these policies and documents. The status of international students and student-consumers might be proved as conflict and incompatible.

## **2.4 Quality assurance and global university rankings**

This section reviews current debate about quality assurance (QA) and global university rankings. Examining how QA has been developed in the last 30 years and reviewing the intensive debates about the definitions of quality and QA reveals its nature of difficulty and complexity, which discourage students' engagement. On the contrary, global university rankings strongly engage with consumerist paraphernalia by nations, parents, and students, notwithstanding rankings' technical issues. The section aims to present how quality assurance and global university rankings have become a strong push for marketisation of higher education and closely associated with the debate of student-consumer demanding value for money from their institutions.

### **2.4.1 Quality assurance**

Consumerist forces empower students to make rational educational choices and demand better quality teaching from HEIs based on business-like mechanisms such as quality assurance reports, league tables and student satisfaction surveys (Naidoo et al, 2011). In the past three decades, external QA in HE has developed worldwide (Woodhouse, 2004). Frazer (1992) claims the 1990s as 'the decade of quality', and Woodhouse (2000) considers the 2000s as 'the decade of international quality', and later on, Newton (2010) notes these developments as 'the quality revolution'. A large variety of procedures and instruments of QA have been developed (Leiber et al, 2015) for a 'well-institutionalized regulatory field' (Westerheijden et al, 2007). Accreditation, assessment, and audit activities conducted by quality assurance agencies have facilitated a 'quality culture' within HE worldwide (Beerrens, 2018).

The ongoing progress influences all stakeholders in HE (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Intensive debates about HE quality and the impacts of quality assurance have also increased significantly at the institutional and international levels (Akareem & Hossain, 2016). The penetration of market-driven mechanisms and consumerism in HE is considered one major catalyst for the immense development of external QA (Ritzer, 2002; Lomas, 2007; Harvey & Williams, 2010). The various funding resources of HE determines increased evidence-based accountability for stakeholders, including governments, taxpayers and students (Woodhouse, 2004). The internationalisation of HE also requires more transparent information for international comparability (Woodhouse, 2000). In countries like the US and UK, students are self-funding, which leads to HE accountability directly involving students (Lomas, 2002). Many quality assurance agencies aim to safeguard the standards and improve HE quality on behalf of students' interest by providing surveys about student's satisfaction, graduate employability and other aspects of HE (Beerkens, 2018; Damian et al, 2015). Academics argue that how effective QA is on student learning remains unknown (Beerkens, 2018) or inadequately proved (Harvey, 2016; Stensaker, 2007). Along with the controversy, student's engagement becomes the norm in internal or external QA. Students are expected to contribute their survey feedback or represent at the QA boards to 'contribute to a more effective and comprehensive QA system' (Beerkens & Udam, 2017).

#### **2.4.1.1 The background of QA in HE**

Scholars consider modern HE quality assurance primarily formed in North America and Europe in the 1990s (Zhang & Su, 2016). In 1990, the US federal government called for accreditation within higher education which focused on assessing student learning outcomes and institutional performance (Ewell, 2010). The British government published a white paper 1991, Higher Education: A New Framework, which first emphasised the need for quality assurance mechanisms (quality control, quality audits and quality assessment) within HEIs (Zhang & Su, 2016). Later in 1999, the Bologna process in Europe facilitated the development of a recognizable and comparable HE system, with particular sets of quality standards across European by establishing the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The introduction and elaboration of institutionalised European QA agencies seek to increase student and staff mobility (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). This audit culture spread widely. External monitoring and quality assessment in HE become a norm worldwide. Akareem & Hossain (2016) urge less developed countries to develop QA for their HE systems to avoid missing economic opportunities created by retaining domestic students who spend significant money abroad for 'quality' and to attract foreign students. The authors consider that local institutions and authorities need to raise



awareness to identify and confirm the HE quality so that a group of ‘loyal customers’ will be maintained. The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) forms the ASEA University Network (AUN) to ensure HE quality within Southeast Asian countries (Akareem & Hossain, 2016). The Malaysian government has made extra effort to develop national plans (such as the Ninth and Tenth Malaysia Plan (2006-2015) to improve HE quality and provide benchmarks to institutions so that the country can be developed as a destination of choice for quality and a pivotal hub in the global education network (Chong & Ahmed, 2015).

#### **2.4.1.2 The debates about the QA within HE**

There are debates about the QA in the context of HE, from the definition to its impacts.

##### **The definitions**

Quality is relative to the user of the term and the circumstances in which it is involved. It means different things to different people; indeed, the same person may adopt different conceptualisations at different moments. This raises the issue of whose quality? (Harvey & Green, 1993, p.10).

There are multiple stakeholders in the modern HE sector, including students, employers, government and HE staff (Burrows & Harvey, 1992). Quality is viewed differently by each of these stakeholders, influenced by their interests in HE, and outcomes are interpreted differently by them (Tam, 2001). A ‘power struggle’ explains the conflicts between different groups of stakeholders about what should be assessed based on their interest towards HE and whose voice should be heard (Barnett, 1994). Although agreement has not yet achieved, a framework of conceptualisations by Harvey and Green (1993) are commonly discussed or quoted: quality is excellence, suitability for purpose, value for money and transformative capability.

First of all, the concept of ‘excellence’ refers to a very good or outstanding performance (ENQA, 2014). It has been widely used by accreditation schemes to define institutional quality and service. For example, excellence becomes indicators for REF to measure HEIs’ performance and the outcome becomes the tool of UK government to brand its HE sector.

The second definition is quality as fitness for purpose. Customers have the right to demand the product or service to fit their purpose (Rowley, 1996; Lomas, 2002). The notion has been applied by such as the QAA and ISO 9000 series quality assurance procedures (Lomas, 2002).

The third conception is quality as value for money which has been applied frequently in the HE sector by QA agencies and governments. Although it is contested to define quality as value for money in the context of, HE, parents, taxpayers and students are empowered to expect value for money from HEIs by demonstrating through such as league tables (Randall, 2001). For example, in the UK, governmental documents often use the term to demand accountability from the HE sector. The Office for Students (OfS) as a new UK HE regulator, claims that

almost everything the OfS does is about ensuring value for money in English higher education. It is one of our strategic objectives to ensure that all students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money. We also seek to ensure value for money for taxpayers (OfS, 2020).

The last definition in Harvey and Green's framework is quality as transformation. When it comes to education, cognitive transcendence often involves the provider "doing something to the customer rather than just doing something for the customer" (Harvey & Green, 1993, p.24).

A total of 108 leaders from different HEIs were asked to assign 100 points to four models of quality proposed by Harvey and Green. The result shows that fitness for purpose (33%) and transformation (31%) are the most popular definitions while excellence (19%) and value for money (17%) are less popular definitions with the 108 samples of senior managers. Opposite of the main the interpretation that quality as transformation, quality as value for money has been widely interpreted by funding allocates bodies and quality assurance agencies (Lomas, 2002). Apart from the perspectives of HE staff, Nadiri et al (2009) find that students' perception of quality is primarily affected by the environment HEIs provided including "the registrar, library, faculty office, rector office, dormitory, sports, and health care centre" (p.523). Besides, the authors also discovered that students' family and educational background also influence their perception of HE quality.

### **The impacts**

As the ambiguous definition of quality, current literature extends to debate the positives and negatives of QA. Regardless of the positive effects, first, a number of researchers agree that QA has helped to rebalance the HE prestige economy which values research over teaching (Ewell, 2010; Beerkens, 2018). QA is considered as a 'catalyst' for changing 'quality culture' and attitudes to improve pedagogical practices (Harvey 2006). Seyfried & Pohlentz (2018) point out that 'quality

culture' has been changed to promote the willingness of senior managers and academic staff to conduct evidence-based procedures to innovate their teaching and attitudes towards HE. Second, with greater scrutiny and scepticism placed on HE by QA agencies, the public benefit from transparent information about the HE sector and the stakeholders can also be informed about institutional effectiveness (Ewell, 2010). Third, Beerkens (2018) argues that QA has facilitated professionalising quality processes within universities with the appropriate bureaucracy of standards. Institutions and senior managers have benefited from accumulating knowledge in the progress of professionalisation through sharing best practice and improving organisational learning (Beerkens, 2018; Dill, 2010). The first round of the exercise also showed improved performance as a result of QA (Beerkens, 2018).

In terms of downsides, QA is often accused as a 'bureaucratic/administrative burden' or an 'illegitimate interference' by academic staff (Beerkens, 2018; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018; Tam, 2001). Academics disengage from including QA as a part of daily activity as they criticise its valid link between their work and the performance embodied in QA processes (Tam, 2001). They have no faith that graduates actually benefit from all the QA with better quality of teaching and skills. They questioned if QA has really improved HE's quality (Suchanek et al, 2012)? McClaran (2010) also questions how effective the QAA can be on HEIs and the interest of stakeholders. Evidence is needed to answer these questions; however, the measurement of effects is commonly considered a challenge. First, observed effects are changeable over time since initial discussions seem to be the most effective comparable to that of in later years (Beerkens, 2018). Second, measuring student learning and outcome is also challenging.

#### **2.4.1.3 The Quality Assurance Agency with UK HE**

The massification, marketisation and internationalization have introduced some fundamental changes in the UK HE, and their impacts have been analysed in the previous section. All substantial changes trigger HE standards and quality and need to be secured by external quality assurance agencies to hold up stakeholders' expectations and provide accountability for the public funding HEIs received (Jackson & Bohrer, 2010). Funding reform since 1997 has facilitated a trend towards consumerism within HE and has led to more intense external scrutiny towards HEIs (Jackson & Bohrer, 2010). The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was established as a unified QA system to conduct QA activities on behalf of English, Welsh and Scottish funding council in 1997 (McClaran, 2010). QAA aims to develop quality and standards frameworks for UK HEIs and

provide more transparent information of HE qualifications, programmes and courses for the public and the stakeholders (students and employers) (BIS, 2009).

The introduction of QAA has attracted significant criticism from academics. For example, it is associated with consumerism and instrumentalism in HEIs, which aim to standardise HE as a production industry (Harvey, 2003; Greatrix, 2001). Ritzer (1993) applies 'McDonaldisation' to imply the trend of standardising programs and quality regulation in HE similar with consumers demand the same predictability, reliability and standards with their burger meals. Later it is extended to 'McUniversity' for referring to the increasing parallels between McDonald's and universities (Nadolny & Ryan, 2015). The academic program specifications and subject review handbook from QAA are analogised to the McDonald's quality rules and standards for franchisees (Lomas, 2002). Cheng (2010) conducted a case study to investigate how academics at a pre-1992 institution perceive QA. The results of Cheng (2010) indicate that about 65% of interviewees thought the quality assurance mechanisms have little impact on their work and considered agencies like QAA a bureaucratic practice. Only 35% of participants considered QA helps teaching practice improvement and raises teaching staff's awareness of providing good quality of teaching (Cheng, 2010).

Having students actively engage with the process of QA is a main rationale of promoting students being consumers (Little & Williams, 2010). Students were expected and encouraged to participate QA in teaching and learning process before the changes to HE in the UK. The traditional mode of engagement has transferred to focus more on assurance quality and standards through external QA mechanisms (Little & Williams, 2010). Under the New Labour government (1997 – 2010), quality assurance was very important. Periodic 'subject review' inspections, given a mark out of 24, were used extensively by league table providers (and possibly by students) in evaluating universities. They were certainly prominent in the minds of university academics and administrators in the way in which Ofsted is prominent in the thoughts of schoolteachers. In the current environment, the QAA seems increasingly irrelevant and redundant. Quality evaluation services were, at one point recently, put up for tender by HEFCE, and the QAA had to re-apply for them. It was thereafter limited to whole-institution reviews. However, OfS has recently effectively taken over the main regulatory function, with a focus on consumer protection as the basis for 'registration' as a provider. There has been an attempt, through the TEF, to metricise quality through certain narrowly defined outputs (graduate destinations and earnings, NSS scores etc).

The latest developments of OfS have attracted considerable criticism. Scholars, university staff and HE-related organisation leaders question its ability and legitimacy as the single market regulator. Firstly, OfS consistently claims its primary mission is protecting students' rights and interests. However, its actual engagement with students fails to support its claim (e.g., Machin, 2020; Ashwin & Clarke, 2022). OfS fails to show how it defines 'the student interest'. On the contrary, the term is considered a pretence to intervene in the university's business under the pressures of ministers and media (Ashwin & Clarke, 2022). The student panel members reported they were threatened with sanctions after raising the diversification of the curriculum at meetings. Also, some panellists considered that their voices were not heard when meetings were followed by set-up agendas (Natzler, 2021). Secondly, QAA's withdrawal from working with OfS provokes people to question OfS' expertise and knowledge base to conduct interventions in university affairs. In addition, losing QAA means that OfS becomes the one that sets standards meanwhile monitors the standards (Hewitt, 2023). Thirdly, the tension between OfS and HEIs keeps rising, which causes concern as a functional and healthy relationship is urged to be maintained (ibid.). The new regulations OfS placed on universities, such as the six grounds for intervention and the prohibition of conditional, unconditional offers, highlight the confusion of different ideologies and regulatory frameworks. The most recent government announcement on 'rip off' university courses which, OfS will place a number cap on HEIs which fail to deliver graduates with good career prospects (DfE, 2023). Davies (2023) responds to the announcement with 'ridiculous and nihilistic' on The Guardian that graduates' employment outcomes in a class-based society should not only rely on universities. The capping will attack Humanities and Art subjects and students from disadvantaged backgrounds to study further.

Therefore, it is hard for the wider public and students to understand the quality assurance system and assess the information they need to make informed decisions. The role of safeguard that regulators and agencies such as QAA and OfS aim to play remains questionable. How well these quality assurance regulators respond to students' concerns and complaints also remains unknown. Most students are completely unaware of most of the quality assurance processes, agencies and regulations. However, they are more aware of league tables and rankings (which are based on the various measures) and the much more intangible 'reputation'.

## **2.4.2 Global university rankings**

University rankings have become a global phenomenon attracting much academic discussion. A wide audience have used ranking schemes for many different purposes. Governments are keen on

referring to the rankings to make decisions related to universities and are zealous about building world-class intuitions. University leaders attempt to achieve a higher place in the rankings to secure reputation, funding and student recruitment. The labour market and employers often use rankings to learn prospective employee's education background or target particular cohorts of graduates (Hazelkorn, 2015). Students are provided an easy guide or quality information of universities to make choices and be rational consumers of HEIs in the context of marketisation of HE.

There are intensive debates around ranking schemes. On the one hand, ranking is considered as an information provider to contribute transparency and reinforce healthy competition among HEIs and nations (Teichler, 2011). On the other hand, ranking is continuously criticised in terms of its data, methodology and presentation which misrepresent the higher education sector and mislead its audience. While the debates are ongoing, the popularity of university rankings continues to grow as Longden (2011) argues that “university rankings are ubiquitous and here to stay” (p.84). The ascendancy of university rankings facilitates “increasing marketisation of higher education, greater mobility of students, and ultimately the recruitment of foreign students” (Harvey, 2008, p. 187).

So, what do these rankings have to do with international students and the concept of them being consumers? This section attempts to present some perspectives for this question. The first part focuses on the background of global university rankings and exemplifies four well-known rankings. The second part analyses the rationales that underpin the popularity of these rankings followed by the discussion of their criticisms. The third part aims to further discuss the overall criticism of the rankings and potential damages, and the final part focuses on the impacts of rankings, especially on international students.

#### **2.4.2.1 The emergence of international university rankings**

The ranking of universities has had a long history (Jöns & Hoyler, 2013). For example, the US Bureau of Education started to publish systematic information on institutions in 1870. A century later in the 1960s, the development of scientific databases such as the Science Citation Index and Social Science Citation Index facilitated the comparison of science globally (Peters, 2019). Research bibliometrics also provided quantitative measurements for modern international rankings (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has produced data about the classification of universities and colleges on a regular basis since 1973 (Jöns & Hoyler, 2013), while the emergence of the ‘best colleges in the country’ published by the

U.S. News and World Report in 1983 was the most referred case of the commercial publications which incorporate comparative data of universities (Hazelkorn, 2015). The systematic practice of ranking dates back to the early 1990s which was the period of neoliberal restructuring of the public sectors (Shore & Wright, 1999). The Department of Education in 1992 initiated newspapers to publish 'league tables' of schools and soon expanded to universities (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). The first rankings of UK universities were published by the Times in 1992 and followed by The Sunday Times and Financial Times in 1997 and The Guardian in 1998 (ibid.).

Along with the blooming of national rankings, an era of supranational ranking started with the significant growth of international rankings in the new millennium such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in 2003 and the Times Higher Education World University (THE) Rankings in 2004 (Hazelkorn, 2015). The landscape of global university rankings nowadays is "over 150 different national and specialist rankings, and almost 20 global rankings" (Hazelkorn, 2018, p.6). The Academic Ranking of World Universities; Times Higher Education's World University Rankings; and Quacquarelli Symonds' World University Rankings are generally accepted as the most famous global rankings and dominate most of the academic reference (Dowsett, 2020; Hazelkorn, 2018). The European U-Multirank is commonly referred to when comparing its measurements and purposes with the major players.

### **The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)**

The ARWU was published by the Center for World-class Universities from the Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003 (Hauptman Komotar, 2020). The initial aim of ARWU was to determine the ranking of top Chinese HEIs on the global stage (ARWU, 2020). The overall goal is to measure universities' research performance and education quality.

Although ARWU is proud of its 'objective' indicators and the precursor status of international university rankings, its methodology is frequently criticised. Some criticise that ARWU can be a holistic ranking as it deliberately focuses on research performance and further prioritises research performance on the natural, technical and social science (Marginson & Van der Wende 2007; Taylor & Braddock, 2007). Therefore, the rankings are often criticised for these priorities at the expense of universities' other core missions such as teaching and learning and other subjects such as arts and humanities subjects. Scholars concerned about language and cultural bias are raised as the ranking uses only English bibliometric databases (Hazelkorn et al, 2014; Kauppi, 2018). The criteria of the numbers of winning Nobel Prizes are also controversial as the controversial nature

of the Nobel Prize criterion itself cannot reflect the quality of education (Marginson & Van der Wende 2007).

### **Times Higher Education (THE) world university rankings**

THE ranking was first published in 2004 by the Times Higher Education Supplement (now Times Higher Education) and corporation with Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) (Hauptman Komotar, 2020). THE has its focus on research-intensive institutions by using 13 indicators grouped into five categories with different weight distributions (THE, 2019). Compared with ARWU, THE includes 'subjective' indicators which conduct surveys from academic peers and graduate recruiters to generate the ranking's scores. For example, 33% of the rankings score is based on the result of the annual Academic Reputation Survey which generates over 20,000 scholars' personal opinions (THE, 2019). Taylor & Braddock (2007) criticises peer review indicators as they "would be influenced by their own prejudices, loyalties and other positive and negative feelings arising from personal experience" (p.248). The bias of weighting only English citations also is frequently criticised (Kauppi, 2018).

### **The Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) world university rankings**

Quacquarelli Symonds has published the QS world university rankings annually since the company stopped the collaboration with Times Higher Education for THE-QS from 2004 to 2009. QS keeps the methodology they used for THE-QS, while THE adopts a new one. The QS ranking uses six metrics with different weight and are grouped by four categories: research, teaching, employability, and internationalization to evaluate an institution's capacity (QS, 2020). According to Hazelkorn et al (2014), the European University Association (EUA) surveys on ranking and university strategies and shows that the QS ranking is the most powerful global university ranking (52%) followed by the THE (50%) and the ARWU (48%). The QS attracts the same criticism with THE as its data is subjective (Federkeil et al, 2012). For example, the QS 2020 version was based on personal judgments on institutional reputation from over 94,000 academics and over 40,000 employers (QS, 2020).

### **The European U-Multirank**

The U-Multirank is sponsored by the European Commission. The system claims to take different approaches to the big game players with focus on institutional diversity driven by users and stakeholders (U-Multirank, 2020a). The ranking produces data based on five categories: Teaching



and learning, Research, International orientation, Regional engagement and Knowledge transfer (U-Multirank, 2020b).

In regard to the institutions participation rate, individual ranking has published the numbers of participating institutions. ARWU ranks about 1800 universities each year and the best 1000 universities were ranked in 2019 (ARWU, 2019). THE assessed almost 1400 institutions worldwide (THE, 2020). U-Multirank currently includes approximately 1600 HEIs from 95 countries worldwide (U-Multirank, 2020a). Apart from institutions' engagement, a tremendous annual increase of viewers provides the publications with the world-set data sustainable financial support (Hazelkorn, 2015). For example. the QS had 7 million viewers of its website, and the 15.3 million people visited the website of the Best College Rankings in 2009 (ibid.)

Apart from the users' statistics, the rankings have also attracted enormous academic discussions. Teichler (2011) concludes three major types of literature on university rankings on extant discussions. The first group advocates rankings who see the ranking movement benefits for the higher education sector. These types of publications consider the criticisms and weaknesses of rankings are not the real threat but can be improved by more investments. The second type of publications focuses on criticising rankings by addressing the concepts and the impacts of rankings but not by detailing further methodology issues or researching findings of the influences. The third type of publications is formed by institutional researchers who are examining the main issues of the discourse. The ranking movement has been analysed from the concepts, methods, data and impacts in a natural standing point.

#### **2.4.2.2 Reasons for emergence and popularity**

In terms of the reasons why the global league tables have emerged and gained such high popularity, the study focuses on three aspects. Firstly, rankings are considered as information providers by offering transparency of universities to the public which governments and universities might fail to provide (Usher & Savino, 2006). As Coates (2017) argues:

universities should be among the most transparent institutions in the world, yet significant gaps remain about how to define and describe what they do and how their purpose is best conveyed to diverse audiences (P.6).

The quality assurance reports are “never intended for a public audience as they are heavy on jargon, and unsuitable for measuring or comparing institutional and student performance” (Hazelkorn, 2018, P.13). In contrast, the global league tables make the public assess the ‘user-friendly’ (Locke, 2011, p. 209) information directly without both institutional and governmental intervention (Selingo, 2020). While the validity and reliability of rankings representing the quality of higher education is highly debatable, these famous rankings are often perceived as proxies for the quality of higher education (Chen, 2008). In addition, most of the rankings advertise heavily on their measure and assess functions of higher education performance and quality. For example, ARWU’s reports point out that their 70% of ranking scores are based on quality of education and quality of faculty and another 20% of weight based on the quality of research (Hauptman Komotar, 2020). Both THE and the QS refer to assess the quality of teaching and research directly (ibid.). While U-Multirank uses A to E to represent different level of performance, A represents ‘very good, while E represents ‘weak’, it claims that ‘quality lies in the eye of the beholder’ (Vroeijenstijn, 1995; U-Multirank, 2020b).

Second, globalisation has driven the demand for rankings beyond the needs of competing for students, staff, funding, and partnership, to that of geopolitical positioning (Hazelkorn, 2018). Higher education has been repositioned as a global actor which facilitates knowledge transfer to the economy and building ‘world-class’ universities has become a strategic plan for enhancing national and regional competitiveness (Hazelkorn, 2015). Building universities with top ranking positions has been an important agenda for many countries, institutional leaders, and policymakers (Shin & Toutkoushian 2011).

Third, “the view of students as consumers who expect value for money” has also fuelled the growing demand for rankings (Clarke, 2007, p. 35). Usher & Savino (2006) state that “students compare world rankings with fee levels in order to judge the ‘value for money’ offered by institutions” (p. 784). The rankings become “a greater need for consumer guidance across the board’ in the world of global HE massification” (Altbach, 2004, p. 21).

### **2.4.2.3 Criticisms**

There are many criticisms of university rankings. Many scholars contend the idea of measuring and ranking universities. For example, Longden (2011) argues that

A university is a complex, dynamic organisation continually changing, year on year with respect to the faculty providing the teaching, to the form and nature of the curriculum offered, to the resources provided. To capture all that complexity in a single measure makes little sense (P.85).

Peters (2019) argues that “the rankings industry has the potential to do damage both to individual institutions and to the sector as a whole” (p.11). Brown (2006) takes a strong position to oppose commercial league tables as the following four arguments that against publishers to represent institutional teaching and research quality.

- a) Rankings are based on data and assumptions about data that are scientifically questionable. University rankings will influence universities to produce the ‘wrong’ kind of higher education.
- b) League tables reinforce the tendency to see higher education as a product to be consumed rather than an opportunity to be experienced and viewed as being ‘just another commodity’.
- c) Risk of allowing commercial considerations inexorably leads the university to a position where the market determines quality. More generally, the creation of the impression that some institutions are better than others when in a diverse, mass system, there can be no one ‘best university’ or a single view of quality.
- d) League tables indeed have to strengthen the market position of institutions that are already prestigious and well-funded, but at the expense of those that may be seeking to build a reputation by attending to the needs of students and employers (p.38).

Although there are no agreements on the disadvantages of the rankings, three common criticisms have been discussed frequently: methodological weaknesses, overvaluing of research performance and the commercial nature of rankings compilers.

### **Methodological weaknesses**

Teichler (2011) considers either the subjective or objective indicators are the weaknesses of the current league tables as all of them rely on ‘the available data’ which disproportionately focus on input, output, and process indicators. The author also argues that institutional indicators have not fully considered differences by disciplines (Teichler, 2011). Therefore, methodological weaknesses

might create an endemic malfunction as the decision-makers of HEIs and nations respond accordingly to succeed based on the distorted metrics (ibid., p. 75).

### **Overvaluing research performance**

As “research is an international activity and reasonable indicators exist for comparing institutions” so research becomes the main focus of the ranking systems (Butler, 2010, p.17). Rankings like ARWU overlook the other missions which universities are usually contributing socially such as teaching, knowledge transfer and service (Carmen & Enrique, 2018). However, enhancing research productivity is viewed as a critical factor in competing for institutional reputation and prestige across the globe. Research productivity is related to external funding, especially for research and development funding (Toutkoushian & Webber, 2011). The emergence of world university rankings causes national and international obsessions with achieving world-class status (Douglass, 2016), such as China’s ‘2020 Plan’, Korea’s national HE plans to build more top universities (Shin, 2009) and causes institutions to overvalue research performance (Marginson, 2017).

Although research is the primary driver of ranking outcomes, the data, methodology and interpretations on research performance have been continuously questioned. There are significant differences among the major rankings while they all focus on measuring the same research criteria (Olcay & Bulu, 2017). The full range of university research productivity has not been covered by the rankings’ selected criteria which is only based on the available data (Carmen & Enrique, 2018). Toutkoushian & Webber (2011) point out that three factors contribute to the challenge to measure research performance: “lack of available data; difficulty in measuring the quality versus quantity of research and difficulties in aggregation” (p.136-137). The typical data collection by counting the research funding, publications, citations, professional awards, and patents to measure the research productivity is criticised as overly “rely[ing] on either input or output measures of research and emphasis[ing] quantity over quality” (ibid., p. 136-137). More importantly, when the rankings disproportionately rely on research-based indicators and promote the results to prospective students and their parents, a key question needs to be addressed: “is research a proxy for teaching quality?” (Trigwell, 2011, p.177-178).

#### **2.4.2.4 The impacts**

##### **On nations**

The initial release of the ARWU in 2003 received dynamic responses from different nations and organisations. Europa responded that the reports “were not (yet) accepted through the community”

(Europa 2004, p.80) and The Economist praised the ARWU as the ‘world super-league’ (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007). Most countries are prompted with a strong desire for their institutions to achieve high-ranking as it signals a country’s prestige and achievement within the context of globalisation and at the era of knowledge economy (Locke, 2011). For example, the German Ministry of Education and Research stated

We have a lot of very good universities across the board in Germany, a high average standard, but what we lack are really top universities...The latest ranking table clearly shows why it is that Germany needs top universities (Hazelkorn, 2018, p.6 cited from Dufner, 2004).

The concern led the German government to establish the Exzellenzinitiative in 2005 to provide guidelines to respond to the global competition (Salmi, 2016). Other countries have also responded with ambitious goals (Hazelkorn, 2018). The Chinese government aimed at building world-class universities by establishing the ‘985’ and ‘211’ projects. Okebukola (2010) points out that Nigeria aimed at having at least two universities be ranked as top 200 institutions by the international rankings by 2020 by establishing a quality assurance system. Vietnam determines to have HE reform to improve the performance in the global university rankings, so far, two Vietnamese universities have recently appeared in the top 1000 on either QS or THE ranking (The World Bank, 2020)

### **On universities**

Two decades ago, universities were predominantly ‘in national context’ without much international competition and comparison (Altbach, 2016, p. 4). The global rankings have driven “the notion of a world university market” which places the HE sector under international competitive pressures (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p.306). With the development of global rankings, universities are incentivised to enhance their global status (ibid.). The global status is largely defined and recognised through its performance on global rankings (Hazelkorn, 2018). Rankings are systematically used as a guide to policy which related to funding allocation or additional investments for HEIs (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). Thus, external pressures are placed on HEIs to ensure their competitiveness on the international rankings. For example, Locke (2011) claims that HEIs in England are strongly affected by rankings regarding strategic decision making and routine management processes.

There are institutions which have tried to boycott rankings but failed and accommodated to live with them (Locke, 2011). However, the accommodation may result in unintended and undesirable consequences for HEIs. The world rankings and national league tables largely reflect the university's resources and reputation instead of the quality or performance (ibid.). There are individual institutional cases which have also been proved to fail the goal as unaffordable investments. The University of Rochester and the University of Kentucky were both forced to abandon their plan to enhance their ranking mission as \$420m and \$112m additional cost were needed to reach the aim (Hazelkorn, 2018). Universities are usually forced to accommodate the league tables as

their over-determining influence on institutional status and reputation, student choice and graduate recruitment, the views and opinions of government, employers and peer institutions, and overall societal confidence in institutions (ibid., p. 9).

In a global competitive environment, the lesson for institutions might be: “better to be ranked and visible, then be unranked and invisible” (ibid., p.10).

### **On international students**

Many studies have shown that international students are heavily influenced by international rankings on making their choice. For international students, rankings serve as an assessing tool to screen out competitive choice and also as a marketing and signalling tool for themselves after they graduated (Chen, 2008). Hazelkorn (2015) considers that rankings are perceived to fulfil an important function in terms of value-for-money and quality by self-funding international students. A report shows that international students “choose the country and subject areas of the study based on their calculations regarding them and status reward a foreign degree can bring” (Varghese, 2008, p. 22). A working paper finds that “92% of international students perceived UK rankings are either important or very important for informing their choice” (Roberts & Thompson, 2007, p. 4).

Among the international students, there are groups which react stronger towards the rankings than others. Cebolla-Boado et al (2018) investigated Chinese students' motivations to study in the UK and found a significant positive association between the numbers of Chinese students and institutional prestige, especially for master's students. The authors further emphasise their finding,

in which Chinese students decode a high university ranking as the sign of a 'good' university and largely take the role of rankings for granted (p.376).

Some factors might explain why university rankings play a key role in international students' choice. Firstly, the global rankings provide students with straightforward information about their choices. As Broecke (2015) states that "prospective students do not necessarily complain about the quantity of information available, but rather about how that information is presented to them" (p.137). Secondly, ranking results have been promoted with wide media coverage. Universities post the ranking onto their websites to promote themselves for prospective students. The rankings publications keep emphasising their value and appeal for international students. For example, THE explains how each of its rankings is helpful for international students.

World University Rankings... produces a ranking that is generally useful and reliable irrespective of your particular needs or interests. World Reputation Rankings provides prospective students what the university experience looks like by proving how others think of a university because those reviews are a good indicator of the quality of a university. The World Reputation Rankings asks ... reveal the most powerful university brands globally. ... For students looking to study abroad or simply keen to explore alternatives, regional rankings shine a spotlight on key areas for international students (THE, 2018).

Thirdly, the rankings have official endorsement, which some governments use to determine scholarship eligibility for students to study abroad based on the international rankings (Halzkorn, 2015). Rankings are perceived by the authorities as "a proxy of quality or value for money to assess students' funding applications" (Clark, 2007, p.43). For example, some countries such as Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Qatar only fund students who are admitted by the top 100 universities (Salmi & Saroyan, 2007). Some countries limit employment or visa opportunities to graduates from top ranked institutions. For example, when Netherlands immigration policy said that "only some knowledge workers are eligible to enter the Netherlands, the standard for skilled migrants were the students who graduated from a university ranked top 150 either by the ARWU or the THE in 2007" (Hazelkorn, 2015, p.140).

Last but not least, students and HE community have a strong perception that students' life and career chances can be affected by where they get the degree from (Hazelkorn, 2015). The labour market and employers across the globe have associated rankings with recruitment practices. A UK

study shows that a quarter of graduate recruiters of the study sample rely on league tables such as THE as their key source to learn about the graduates' institutional quality and standards (HEFCE, 2006, p.80). The same study also points out that rankings are often used by employers as "a method of pre-selection, targeting graduates of the same top 10 or 20 universities" (Hazelkorn, 2015, p.148). Souto-Otero & Enders (2017) find out that "larger, qualifications intensive, more globalised in terms of operation and staff and more training intensive work organisations have greater odds of placing high importance on rankings" (p.799).

This section first reviewed the quality and quality assurance of UK higher education. The controversial definition of quality attracts critical commentary on quality assurance. The development of quality assurance frameworks reveals that the difficulty and complexity put students and parents off engaging with the results and further distance them from quality assurance and improvement. The review shows that the rationale for positioning students as consumers to improve HE quality by students demanding more transparency and high-quality teaching from HEIs is not accurate. The complexity of what quality and quality assurance are actually shows that students are in a weaker position to demand them from the universities which are traditionally regarded as knowledge distributors. The section then reviewed the alternative 'quality proxy': university rankings. The four most common global rankings have been discussed, including their background, methodology and criticisms. The popularity of these global rankings caused academics concerns due to their methodological weakness, overvaluation of research performance at the expense of universities' other core missions and the commercial nature of most ranking producers. While such worries persist, these rankings have been promoted widely, attracting national and international attention and strategic responses. Its popularity and simplicity remain it a strong push for marketisation of higher education and closely associated with the debate of student-consumers.

## **2.5 The student-as-consumer debate**

Although successive governments in the UK continue to push the narrative of students as consumers and legitimate the legal rights of student-consumers, the identity is continually contested. This section reviews the debate starting from the purpose of HE, to the for and against the idea of student-consumer, to students' own perspectives on the position.



### 2.5.1 Is HE a business?

Teaching, research and public service are seen as HEIs' primary purposes. However, conflicts can often occur among the three missions (Albach et al, 2009). A knowledge distributor developing education for the public cannot be consistent with generating revenue to survive and thrive in a profit-driven marketplace. However, some authors believe that HE can serve as private good along with the nature of servicing the public. Pucciarelli & Kaplan (2016) thus propose to apply business practice on the premise of maintaining HE's societal nature. They identify the need to increase the market share and prestige, adopt robust entrepreneurial thinking and cooperate with key stakeholders to co-create values. The market mechanisms have more significant potential to respond to the challenges.

Further expanding Pucciarelli & Kaplan's (2016) point on the impacts of digital on HE, Williamson (2021) adopts the term 'platform/digital capitalism' to refer to the "new business model and market form of the web" (p.50). Digital capitalism has played a vital role in reforming HE with the global HE industry aligned with market-driven transformation. The article conducts Pearson as a novel case to present how profit-making products can be integrated into the HE sector through digital platforms and the benefits the sector can generate from improving the digital infrastructures of HE.

Many scholars dispute the business analogy. Calma & Dickson-Deane (2020) argue that applying business concepts to HE is problematic as quality measurement and the concept of students as consumers are incompatible. Given this 'super complexity' (Barnett, 2000), it is not easy for students to be rational consumers as information is increased from multiple sources and rendered inaccessible with "oblique and highly specialised language for students" (Naidoo et al, 2011 p.1149). In addition, HE is a service with a high experience value, so it is hard to judge it before experiencing it.

Universities are different from other service industries. While the complaints mechanisms are welcome, many institutions still need to provide transfer or refund schemes for students as other businesses do (Lomas, 2007). Naidoo et al (2011) also point out that it is difficult for students to transfer to another programme or university and obtain a refund. Furthermore, students are aware of the symbolic value of their degree, which might offer them better social status and more opportunities. Therefore, they would not rate their university poorly to affect their ranking.

Although academics defend the HE sectors as an exception, consumerist mechanisms unevenly impact different types of universities (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). The authors state that the consumerist force substantially impacts a university in a more vulnerable position. At the same time, institutions in the upper levels of the hierarchy with more resources tend to conserve their academic principles and maintain their dominant position. Brown & Carasso (2013) further suggest that market-based policies would increase the stratification of HE and disincentive to students with socio-economic disadvantage.

In addition, the tuition fee reform discussed above points out that students achieve private benefits by having their degrees as position goods to exchange for a positive employment outcome, which justifies their financial responsibility for their education. In return, the quasi-market mechanisms have been adopted to provide students with value for money and demonstrate that the skills and knowledge offered by universities are instrumental practical and transferrable. However, there is a lack of evidence to prove that the individual can benefit from having the degrees with clear economic calculus. For example, Mateos González and Wakeling (2020) clarify that having a degree is not a guarantee for desirable career prospects.

## **2.5.2 Students cannot be consumers**

Academic staff are considered as the group with the most resistance towards identifying students as consumers (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Guilbault, 2016). The following reasons are commonly referred to against students being consumers from the academic level.

### **2.5.2.1 The tension between being a consumer and being an active learner<sup>2</sup>**

A consumer implies a student who expects a ‘product’ or ‘service’ to be delivered in a manner to satisfy their needs for what they pay for (Tomlinson, 2015). Instrumentalism implies that students make minimal effort to get their degree and enter the world of work. While being an active learner means students must work hard to meet the academic performance set by universities, independent learning and cognitive demands are also required from an active learner in a more engaged and self-directed learning process (Tomlinson, 2015). Naidoo et al (2011) express concern that,

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<sup>2</sup> An active learner is someone who engages in their studies actively and takes responsibility to enhance their deep learning outcomes.

An active partner is someone who forms a partnership with their teaching staff to co-create the curriculum and contribute to their classes actively, etc.

Students transform learning into picking up, digesting, and reproducing what students perceive as an unconnected series of short, neatly packaged information. In the long run, students distance themselves to achieve higher-order skills and be autonomous and lifelong learners (Naidoo et al, 2011, p.1151).

There is more evidence shows that consumers' identity compromised student engagement and achievement. For example, Bunce et al, (2017) investigates students' learner identity within the UK by surveying 698 undergraduate students. Her findings indicate that consumer identity and learner identity are negatively correlated. The preexisting consumerist culture is not helpful for students to establish learner identity. The findings of Bunce and Bennett (2021) indicate that students with stronger consumer identity perform academically worse than their peers adopting stronger learner identities. Bunce et al (2022) investigated 679 undergraduates' discipline identity and academic achievement and achieved similar suggestions of negative correlation between consumer identity and students' academic success.

### **2.5.2.2 Negative pedagogic dynamic between students and academics**

Adopting a marketing perspective comes at the expense of the institution's pedagogical objective. Although governments and institutions encourage students to be consumers, academic staff give very limited support for the identification (Lomas, 2007). Based on Lomas' research, there was great hostility towards the notion of students as consumers amongst academic staff. Similar with students, academic staff are exposed to the consumerist framework daily. They acknowledged the more significant influence of consumerism, especially with the introduction of 'top-up' tuition fees in England since 2006 (ibid). Molesworth et al (2009) argue that a marketised HE system transfers the learning process from a 'being' mode to a 'having' mode. Similarly, Jabbar et al (2017) interviewed 22 academics in a highly marketised department: business schools to discover that students increasingly behave like consumers and view their education as a transactional service. The finding indicates that tension is increased between the academics and the university managers and between students and academics.

### **2.5.2.3 Alternative roles**

Some researchers argue that contesting the concept of students as consumers does not mean denying students engagement in university governance and quality assurance (e.g., Naylor et al, 2021). On the contrary, positioning students in a single role: a consumer, might diminish students

as active agents and partners to co-create their experiences (ibid.). As the HE sector is accommodating an increasingly diverse study body (Marginson, 2016), students should be seen as active changing agents who can have multiple key roles concerning HE quality assurance and governance. For example, McCulloch (2009) believes that co-production should be more appropriate to define the relationship between lecturers and students. Emphasising the student as a co-producer stresses learning process should be a collective experience. Kay et al (2010) propose that students should be valued as change agents who can be evaluators voicing their feedback, active participants involving decision-making, partners co-creating university policies and structures.

Apart from students' engagement at the macro level in relation to university governance and quality assurance, some scholars also encourage students to participate at the micro level with alternative roles. Instead of emphasising students' rights and power through national surveys and course evaluations, Carey encouraged students to participate in curriculum development and design (2013). The study also suggests that students who participate in improving curriculum design believe that their experiences and insights will enrich future students, proving that their incentive is more altruistic than self-interest (Carey, 2013).

### **2.5.3 Students are/can be consumers**

There are alternative attitudes of denying students as consumers, which are more positive and proactive. Some authors argue that students are institutions' consumers (Cuthbert, 2010; Guibault, 2016, 2018) and that higher education is a service (Nicolescu, 2009). Some argue that the opponents' criticisms are based on an outdated conception of consumers, represented through the principle that 'the customer is always right'. Student consumers can be co-creators of HE processes. Instead of contesting the position, Guibault (2016, 2018) calls for an end to debate about whether students should or should not be seen as consumers. The author argues that students must be considered consumers and that the use of marketing in HE is beneficial, which is against the majority of current research that indicates viewing students as consumers brings negative impacts. She argues that academics still have the right to decide the best interest of the students rather than give students what they want because 'customers are always right'. However, the author does not provide empirical evidence to support her argument. It is worth noting that within the majority of marketing and consumer services journals, 'students are consumers' has become the premise for researchers to find what factors influence student-consumers' satisfaction, and how to develop effective marketing strategies for HEIs to compete students in HE market.

### **2.5.3.1 Students are the primary consumers of HEIs**

Although there is no adequate evidence showing that students make choices or define their studies based on consumer principles (Woodall et al, 2014), it is clear that universities see students as a source of income and conduct consumer discourse to market their service (Carey, 2013). Institutions' senior managers are more comfortable considering students as consumers and conducting market-related strategies (Little & Williams, 2010). Therefore, the institutions construct students as consumers (Lolich & Lynch, 2016). Lomas' empirical research suggests that some academics who are not research- or subject- orientated are also more comfortable considering students as consumers, such as dentistry and nursing lecturers.

Scholars who support the concept of students as consumers argue that HE is a business and students are the primary consumers of universities. For example, Davies & Bansel (2007) argue that "there is nothing distinctive or unique about education or health; they are services" (p.250). These authors considered that higher education sectors operate in a highly competitive environment, and marketing practices are very much needed and helpful. For example, Bowden (2011) states that seeing students as consumers will benefit the HEIs by meeting student satisfaction and building a brand that students are willing to recommend to the institution. Secondary loyalty benefits may also follow from high satisfaction levels such as attracting new students, retaining existing students, donating behaviour, and alumni membership (Helgesen & Nasset, 2007).

### **2.5.3.2 'Customer is always right' is no longer relevant**

Proponents of the consumer identity consider the opponents' criticisms based on an irrelevant market logic: the 'customer is always right, and they should be given what they want'. As Mark (2013) argues, "customers are no longer viewed as passive recipients, but as active participants in service delivery and co-producers of the services they receive" (p.3). The author further explains that a contemporary customer-supplier relationship emphasises collective efforts in which quality service delivery relies on both parties. Ng and Forbes (2009) also contend that "the core service in a university experience is a learning experience that is the co-creation of the people within the university between students and teachers, students and administrators" (p.40). Similarly, a market approach also encourage consumers to participate co-creation the products and services (Essamri et al, 2019). The phrase 'smart consumers' describes someone who actively engages in both co-production and co-creation activities to improve the total value and experience (Roy et al, 2019).

Consumers are the recipients of goods and services and the co-creators within the context of service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Therefore, students can be active consumers who proactively participate in their education experience and take responsibility for their creation.

The debate also focuses on ‘students cannot always be right’. In other words, students do not necessarily have sufficient knowledge to make the right choice or know what they need from HEIs. However, Mark (2013) points out that even primary school students can differentiate between good and inadequate instruction. Covill (2011) also shows that HE students are aware of what teaching styles work for them and “prefer the style that matches their conception of learning” (p.94). Another concern from opponents is that academics need to pander to students to avoid complaints and low ratings. However, studies show that student-consumers can evaluate their class adequately based on their experience and perceptions (Rowan et al, 2017).

Although both sides of the debate provide their rationale for support or against the position of student-consumer, the debate is continued, and the identity is still seen as controversial. As the review shows that the debate most attracts academic criticism and commentary, students’ voice is relatively weak and absent.

## **2.6 Students’ perceptions of the student-as-consumer identity**

Although the debate is ongoing, little evidence shows that students have adopted the identity and expressed consumer orientation towards their HE (Brooks & Abrahams, 2018; Bunce et al, 2017; Finney & Finney, 2010; Tomlinson, 2017). While the empirical research on students’ perspectives and experiences is insufficient, increasing scholarly attention has been shifted to the subject. Although the findings are based on small scale study, Tomlinson (2017) conducts a qualitative approach by interviewing 68 undergraduates who studied at seven institutions in England and suggested three main attitudes emerged from the participants towards the identity of student-consumer: resisting the identity, accepting the identity and being ambivalence.

### **2.6.1 Resisting the identity**

Lolich & Lynch (2016) surveyed Iceland with 4265 students. The results show that students are not going to universities or choosing a course based on the consumer model. The authors further demonstrate that students resist the market-led ideology of treating them as HE consumers as they have their own educational and care imaginaries. The empirical evidence shows that participants resisted commercialising higher education (Lolich & Lynch, 2017). Williams (2012) states that “the

desire for learning to be personally transformative was found amongst students at all types of universities” (p.116).

Research also suggests that paying tuition does not automatically position students as demanding and empowered consumers but as vulnerable consumers (Lolich & Lynch, 2017; Robson et al, 2017). Financial worries create a significant stress source, and fear of indebtedness can result in students abandoning their studies (Robson et al, 2017). Students also express the reasons for being reluctant to accept consumers’ identities that they think it ignore their academic struggle and pressure. Many students lack confidence in their abilities or performance (Lolich & Lynch, 2017).

Saunders (2015) and Bunce et al, (2017) have similar research results indicating that students associated themselves as learners rather than consumers. However, Bennett (2021) considers there are limitations of Saunders (2015) and Bunce et al, (2017). Firstly, Saunders’ research was based on the America HE context, in which different histories of marketisation and tuition regimes might reveal different perspectives when the results generalise to the UK. In addition, Saunders focused on the first-year students who might lack enough experience to make judgments than other year group.

### **2.6.2 Accepting the identity**

According to a large-scale survey by Universities UK (2017), 47% of undergraduates identified themselves as consumers of HE. Koris & Nokelainen’s (2015) study confirms that students expect HEIs to collect and act on their feedback. Respondents felt the university should address issues by introducing a strategy and acting accordingly. However, students also agreed that they must work hard to achieve the degree. Therefore, the findings do not support the claim made by some scholars that students want to work as little as possible to graduate with good results.

Vurio (2013) interviewed students in Finland and found that students who accept the consumer identity consider that students will be empowered within HEIs. They believe that the identification might put students in a better position, especially at research-centric institutions, which are regarded as not considering students’ opinions. However, they admit that the identity would not empower them as genuine customers. The latter’s complaints would result in a refund or an exchange of services or products in private companies. Based on Vurio’s (2013) study, students recognise customer behaviour and define it as passive involvement in the academic community and seeking a degree with minimum effort.

### **2.6.3 Ambivalence**

Students may act like consumers but reject the consumer label, which presents a paradoxical mindset (Williams, 2012). Koris & Nokelainen (2015) aim “to identify the categories of educational experience in which students expect HEIs to be student-customer oriented” (P.115). The study indicates that “students expect to be treated as customers in terms of student feedback, classroom studies, and to some extent also in terms of communication with administrative staff” (p.128).

Raaper (2019) analysed the consumer discourse from the assessment angle and found that students’ notions as consumers might have changed but has not removed the student experience of constraint in assessment. The study clearly shows that political and market language influence students’ understanding of HE and assessment processes. They also want to use the degree to promote competitiveness in the labour market. However, students also show a very limited economic mindset in the practice context of assessment. They do not think or act like consumers in assessment situations. Instead, student participants express their struggles and pressures about the constraints of standards and academic protectives and adjust themselves to be strategic learners (Raaper, 2019).

As shown above, there is increasing attention on researching students’ perceptions, and more empirical insights are provided to understand students’ experiences and perspectives towards the impacts of marketisation and the identity of ‘student-consumer’. However, international students are largely excluded from the current literature, and their opinion and voice on the same subject remain unknown (e.g., Tomlinson, 2017; Reynolds, 2022).

## **2.7 University student identity**

Scholars argue that how contemporary higher education students conceptualise their identity and share the understanding of ‘the student’ are under-researched (Brooks et al, 2022). However, there are some substantial narratives about who a university student is. The previous literature review sections provide a context of the identity of student-consumer and the current debate centred around it. This section shifts the focus to the wider discussion about university student identity and explore different identity theoretical perspectives. In doing so, a more comprehensive understanding of how university students are constructed in relation to the identity and social identity approaches. The section first outlines the identity and social identity and related theories and perspectives. It then reviews the current identities literature on the conceptualisation of higher



education students. Thirdly, it discusses the main discourses and narratives around international students in UK higher education. The section finally concludes with a summary.

### **2.7.1 Identity and multiple identities**

Identity is a popular notion discussed within many disciplines and is considered an essential resource for self-development and self-improvement (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). Identity is the collection of meanings that characterise a person when they occupy a specific role in society, belong to a specific group, or assert certain attributes that make them stand out from the crowd (Burke & Stets, 2009). Identity can be personal, which refers to an individual's perception of him/herself as a whole person and ways to interact with others and the world (Lairio et al, 2013). However, many scholars argue that identity configuration is situated in a comprehensive social environment with a range of cultural norms, beliefs, values and practices (Borlaug et al, 2023) and through a dynamic process (Scheuringer, 2016) of interacting with family, work and other communities. The dynamic process of shaping and constructing identities involves people's experiences, growing ideas and worldviews and the relationship with others, themselves and the world (Richard Milner IV, 2010). Therefore, the ideas of self and society are interwoven, making identity paradoxical, intangible, elusive, constantly changing and emerging (Erikson, 1968). Both individuals and society depend on the other, yielding transactional growth. Understanding who we are reflects how we interact with others and the world (Roger, 2018).

Individuals have a variety of identities as they perform different roles with many personal characteristics within multiple groups (Burke & Stets, 2009). The multiple identities can be categorised as roles such as being a teacher, relational roles such as being a mother, and social identities such as being Chinese (Kulich et al, 2017). These identities sometimes contradict each other (Splitter, 2011), and when the conflict occurs, people apply different coping mechanisms to deal with the inconsistency (Kulich et al, 2017). In addition, Burke & Stets (2009) argue that people have a prominence hierarchy for their identities. When an identity is heavily invested and committed with great positive feeling, that identity is placed at the top of the prominence hierarchy. The intrinsic or extrinsic motivation can also counteract the negative impacts of incompatibility on multiple identities. People occupy multiple identities contributing to a whole which means identity is fluid (Mavroudi, 2007; Martin et al, 2014). The movement can be caused by a stimulus reaction rather than a predetermined choice. The fluid trait of identity allows individuals to shape, adapt and apply the self to different roles throughout life experiences and interactions (Daniels & Brooker, 2014).

According to Burke & Stets (2009), identity theory aims to clarify the particular meanings people ascribe to the various identities they claim, how these identities relate to each other for any given individual, how identities affect behaviour, cognition, feelings, and emotions, and how identities connect individuals to society as a whole.

### **2.7.2 Social identity and theory**

Social identity is “an individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). Social identity is proved as a predictor for peoples’ social preferences and attitudes (Costa-Font & Cowell, 2015). In addition to defining a person’s self-concept, social identity also refers to a collective identity that its members prescribe and assess regarding their beliefs, values and actions (Burke & Stets, 2009). The theory also highlights ways in which the ingroup in a given social situation varies from pertinent outgroups (ibid.) Scholars argue that people are keen to adopt social identity to understand themselves and the people around them and predict their and others’ behaviours (Burke & Stets, 2009). People apply social identification to effectively understand the world and predict future events with collective norms and relatively consensual prototypes (Burke & Stets, 2009; Lüders et al, 2016). Thus, the uncertainty and vagueness will be reduced, and then people take control of their actions and environment with desirable outcomes (ibid).

Social identity theory was developed to explain how people develop their identities and clarify the relationship between the role of self and intergroup identity (Turner et al, 1987). Social identity theory considers that personal identity does not influence people’s behaviours as much as social identity, especially within different social contexts (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015). The theory focuses on the importance of three structural elements: group boundaries’ perceived permeability and stability and the legitimacy of the ingroup’s position about other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015).

### **2.7.3 Social identity with education and learning**

Haslam (2017) considers conducting a social identity approach to education and learning essential. Education is a primarily cooperative endeavour that revolves around people’s ability to take part in their own personal growth via generally positive interactions with teachers and educational systems. Social identity assists in meaningful and successful learning. Education is a critical area for students to do public tests, contests the idea of ‘who they are’ and ‘what they want

to be', and is an essential site for constructing community social identities (McLeod & Yates, 2006). Thus, education constitutes the primary forge in which the material structures of society are produced and reproduced, formed and reformed.

Social identification is essential for students' wellbeing and social behaviours (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015). Students who successfully identify with multiple sources of social identity in an educational context predict that students benefit from higher engagement with university life (Jetten et al, 2012). Scholars also point out that social identification is an essential predictor of students' academic performance as it predicts students' willingness to embrace a deep rather than a surface approach to learning (McCune & Entwistle, 2011).

#### **2.7.4 University student identity**

Daniels & Brooker (2014) suggest that higher education students have to form different identities through learning how to interact with their peers and teaching staff. Being exposed to different university experiences and learning how to be a university student also influences their academic performance (ibid.). Lairio et al (2013) also agree that universities provide a learning environment with three elements closely linked to students' identity construction: curriculum, interaction with peers and teaching staff. A well-organised curriculum and positive interactions yield positive student identity and academic outcomes. Teaching staff play a crucial role in enhancing students' learning and strengthening identity transformation by showing interest in students' wellbeing (Lairio et al, 2013).

##### **2.7.4.1 Adults and the 'students'**

Brooks et al (2022) state that most students start university studies right after they finish compulsory schooling, which are commonly views as 'in transition' (p.24). For majority of students, entering HE means a transition to adulthood, which is an important life course transition (Blichfeldt & Gram, 2013). Bristow et al (2020) and Gravett et al (2020) conduct their studies within the context of UK HE and show that students can be viewed as dependents not adults by the teaching staff. It is commonly considered that the transition is not easy for students (Jones et al, 2020; Prazeres, 2013). One of the main arguments is that students might lose the old familiar student identity while they face committing to new academic culture and requirements. Students might assume the transition to university can be straightforward, while the complex university structures and academic expectations might cause shock and unfamiliarity for students. Transition also means that students need to shift memberships between different communities and practices

(Tobbell et al 2010). For example, Holdsworth (2009) shows that the ‘university student’ is often synonymous with being care-free and privileged, which might cause geographical segregation between locals and students. Students who are seen belong to ‘studentland’ or campus further reinforces exclusivity and stereotypes lead to students facing difficulties to develop sense of belonging and negotiating multiple identities (Prazeres, 2013).

#### **2.7.4.2 Future workers**

The theory of human capital refers to individuals achieving human capital through education and knowledge accumulation to boost the quality of labour and build upon economic growth, and the higher level of human capital individuals own helps them to achieve more earnings (Kogovsek & Kogovsek, 2013; Marginson, 2019). The development of human capital defines education as a channel to produce students as future workers with knowledge and competence (Brooks et al, 2022; Kogovsek & Kogovsek, 2013). Within the human capital theory, students associate the value of their education with lifetime earnings (Brooks et al, 2022). Therefore, one of the prominent roles that higher education is ascribed nowadays is preparing work-ready graduates (Tomlinson, 2010; Daniels & Brooker, 2014). The identity of future workers requires students to have skills that align with what the industry needs. Universities, thus, are expected to produce quality graduates who can prove they have achieved the skills, understanding and attributes to meet an employer’s requirements within a highly changing and demanding work environment (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). Graduates with work readiness attributes are vital to the university’s success and quality (Tomlinson, 2010; Daniels & Brooker, 2014). Apart from the construction of students as future workers at the policy level, students responsible for all their tuition are considered to anticipate a return on their investment through valuable learning experiences to secure future employment opportunities (Mark, 2013).

Brooks and colleagues (2022) point out that students are framed as future workers stemming from the human capital theory within the policy level in all six countries (England, Denmark, Poland, Ireland and Germany and Spain) they study. However, their studies reflect those countries (England, Ireland, Denmark and Poland) strongly influenced by neoliberalism perceived students as future workers the strongest. Spain and Germany, with the concept of university as a public good, perceive students as future workers less significantly. The study also shows that students and staff interpret the identity differently from national policy and media discourse. There are substantial critiques towards the concept of students as future workers only aligning with the

economic gains. The non-economic value of education and work has been reflected by staff and students across all six countries (Brooks et al, 2022).

#### **2.7.4.3 Academic partners**

Academic partner is an identity commonly situated within higher education teaching and learning. The identity recognises the value of a partnership approach between academic staff and students. The partnership approach allows students and teachers to appreciate each other's perspectives, reducing learning barriers and improving students' academic capability (Curran & Millard, 2016). The authors argue that the identity renegotiates the role and power between teachers and students and promotes a learning space with trust and shared responsibilities. A report from the Higher Education Academy emphasises that the UK HE policy pays a lot more attention to students' active engagement in their learning over recent years (Healey et al, 2014). The report suggests that a partnership's reciprocal learning helps "raises awareness of implicit assumptions, encourages critical reflection and opens up new ways of thinking, learning and working in contemporary higher education." (Healey et al, 2014, p.7). However, constructing the identity requires mutual commitment, understanding and shared values. Students should be encouraged to participate in teaching and curriculum design. The pedagogical collaboration between students and teachers will have beneficial and positive outcomes on students' development and the teaching and learning community (Bovill et al, 2011). Although many benefits of student-faculty partnerships have been raised, developing the partnership can be troublesome as many students are unfamiliar with the concept (Cook-Sather, 2014). It is an identity that challenges students' traditional expectation: to "absorb what is offered to them by faculty, neither questioning nor, perhaps, even considering the pedagogical dimension of their learning experience." (Cook-Sather, 2014, p.1101). Students who participated in Cook-Sather's study expressed uncertainty and scepticism regarding their academic capacity as partners and considered the identity transformation "disconcerting and destabilising, even scary" (ibid.). Stacey & Chan (2021) argue that the academic identity takes time and effort from both actors to develop, with the emergence of students being frustrated and instructors being vulnerable. However, the significant enhancement and growth of students and faculty are the positive outcomes (ibid.).

Other scholars consider that the current policy, which redefines students as consumers has negative impacts on students forming the academic partner identity (King & Bunce, 2019). Tomlinson (2014) argues that policymakers should define students as co-producers or partners. These authors believe that collaboration should happen at all the levels of HEIs and universities

should promote the partnership between students and staff (King & Bunce, 2019; Tomlinson, 2014). In doing so, students are motivated with high level of autonomy to engage with their studies and curriculum and then achieve better academic performance.

### **2.7.5 International student identities**

An international student is defined as “a student who has crossed a national or territorial border for education and is now enrolled outside their country of origin” (UNESCO, 2023). Ward et al (1998) emphasised that international students are equivalent with sojourners and tourists who are in the host country for a temporary stay, to study, work, or play. The identity of an international student is equivalent with a social and political position or a ‘ready-made slot’ (Davies & Harré, 1990). The ‘ready-made slot’ is opposite with the idea of “an individual acting out one fixed role or another in response to the demands of a particular social setting” (Hart et al, 2017, p.43), instead it a ‘subject position’ which occurs through tacit invitation, encouragement but with certain social positioning and nuanced power relations.

In 2021/22, there were 679,970 international students studying at UK universities (UUK, 2023), which made up around 22% of the whole HE student population in the UK. While the number of international students continue to increase, there is little research focus on international student identity construction by students per se (Wee, 2019). The current discussion around international student identity is largely from UK policy discourse (Lomer, 2018) and media subjectification (Brooks, 2017). It is important to understand how international students construct their identity and the process of formation so that their needs will be met by host HEIs (Wee, 2019). This section presents the current three common social identifications associated with international student identities.

#### **2.7.5.1 ‘Cash cows’**

International student policies in the UK have revealed details about the economic benefit that international students bring to the UK and are an important export market. Through three phases of recruiting international students: post-colonial, trade and internationalisation, international students are seen as instrumental and global neoliberal objects (Xu, 2022) with an emerging consensus term of ‘cash cows’ for the government and its HE sector. Apart from the national policy, universities constantly prove their success in relation to international students by presenting their economic contribution and benefit to the government and the wider society. For example,

Universities UK (UUKi, 2022a) highlights that “every part of the UK is financially better off – on average by £390 per person because of international students” (para.2).

#### **2.7.5.2 Foreigners without a national identity and a citizenship**

Ross (2007) considers that national identity is the primary identity as Gellner argues that “a man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears” (Gellner, 1983,p.6). Smith (1991) also believes that “national identity is perhaps the most fundamental and inclusive among all the collective identities in which human beings share today (p.143). Researchers suggest that studying abroad can strengthen students’ national identity (Prazeres, 2013). Their studies show that students become more aware of the stereotypes and perceptions about their national identity. International students with a non-national and non-citizenship identity reconfigure their national identities through interactions with locals and students from different nations (ibid.).

According to Ross (2007), citizenship is the process of becoming a member of a political organisation that grants its citizens the protection of specific rights. Rights are inherent that of which is defined by citizenship. According to Splitter (2011), people are frequently encouraged to feel proud of and devoted to their own nation or state, which frequently, though not always, results in feelings of superiority over and contempt for people who belong to other nations.

Alleyne (2002) emphasises that “identities based in ethnic communities have often proved to be politically useful, to provide a sense of solidarity in the face of political and social exclusion” (p.609). Therefore, other scholars (Kulich et al, 2017) consider that the interconnection and social network of same ethnicity is a key predictor for people with a non-national identity to develop either a harmony or a conflict cultural identity, or a combination of the two. Within the context of study abroad, various identities might seem available to international students, but with certain social and cultural norms, some options might not be invited or even forbidden (Hart et al, 2017). For example, the UK government exercised immigration policies to monitor the number of international students. At the level of immigration policy, international students are often seen as a problem or a risk (UUKi, 2022b). With the pre-setting context of contributing financially, international student is an identity that students outside of the UK must apply for and gain the permission to belong to. From the practice level, individual students are required to comply with rules in order to access the education. For example, this identity differentiates the group of students from home students in terms of visa (a legal status to study), full-cost tuition fees

(substantially higher), paying the NHS surcharge up front, and police registration (the scheme was ended on 4 August 2022).

The highly economic-centred positioning limits international students' social identity choices and the immigration policy clarifies that UK government has the power to determine 'who international students are'. The newly released policy on student visa which only allows those study "a PhD or other doctorate; and a research-based higher degree" to bring their partner and children to the UK (Gov.UK, 2024) shows that from 1 January 2024, some prospective international students face choosing the identities between being a parent remaining in their nations and giving up being a postgraduate study in the UK or vice versa.

### **2.7.5.3 Cultural and language learners**

Many researchers explored the relationship between identity transformation and cultural and language learning (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005; Banks, 2017). These authors considered that a new intercultural setting leads individuals to self-reflect and transform particular identities, such as a new culture and a language learner. The process is evolving through intercultural communication, which is rooted in a more nuanced relationship between the "hosts and sojourners, native and non-native speakers and the old and new cultural norms" (Banks, 2017, p19). Norton (2013) considers that language learners are doing more than accumulating knowledge and improving skills. Instead, they use language for "constantly organising and recognising a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (Norton, 2013, p.50). Multiple dimensions such as social and cognitive influence the learning process which requires learners to understand self and others within intercultural interactions.

Although it is important to explore the relationship between culture, language learning and student identity formation, the current literature on international students' identity construction is heavily associated with their struggles with culture and language (Wee, 2019). The language barriers and lack of relevant culture reflected in these studies further reinforces cultural difference and racial stereotypes.

This section presents the current discussion of identity, social identity and related theoretical perspectives in relation to education and learning. It reveals that conducting an identity approach to education helps to understand students and predict their actions, behaviours and values. The university student identity and the main narratives about international students were also reviewed. Transitioning from schooling to university studies is hard, yet students are viewed as 'carefree and



privileged.’ Within the context of the marketisation of UK HE, university students are commonly constructed as future workers. The multiple identity conflicts also reveal that students find it hard to form an academic identity to be the partners of their education. Apart from these narratives, international students have other constructions, such as ‘cash cows’, due to the higher fees they pay. UK policy and immigration rules also position international students as foreigners due to their positions as non-British citizens. The current literature on international students pays substantial attention to their struggles of learning language and culture, which also constructed international students as language and culture learners. Students’ perspectives about their identities are little researched compared to the construction of the policy, which further identifies the gap for this study.

## **2.8 Chapter summary**

The market mechanisms applied within HE reflects the state’s active regulatory role in HE governance (Tomlinson, 2017). From the neoliberal perspective, the government plays a positive role in constructing audit and scrutiny management to protect consumers’ rights and achieve the end goals (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The government seeks to rigorously intervene and regulate the institution and liberate it with more market freedoms (Brown & Carasso, 2013). It is discernible that universities are integrated within the government’s political and social agendas (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2014), and the discussion of HE governance is no longer maintained at the institutional level (Shattock & Horvath, 2020). Raising the quality of HE to protect students’ and taxpayers’ rights has been used to justify successive governments’ role in regulating HE. Reliance on government funding and legislation charging higher tuition fees indicates that the English HE sector is hardly free from political interventions.

Within the changing context and the influence of neoliberal ideology, international higher education has been pushed to the forefront to execute the market logic by the government. Section 2.3 has presented details from the government’s international education policy and strategy on overseas branding and marketing, demonstrating that international students are seen as consumers and neoliberal objects. The narratives around international students are highly associated with economic terms and focus. However, the policy and strategy miss presenting other values of international education and the rights and protection related to international students.

One of the rationalities of ‘student as consumer’ is that government hopes students make demands to improve the quality of their education. Section 2.4 has reviewed the quality of higher education

and views about how to ensure the quality. It shows that quality and quality assurance are controversial. The quality assurance agencies, regulators and policies have been impacted by neoliberalism with market mechanisms such as OfS and NSS. However, the review also shows that students and the wider public are not actively engaging with the quality assurance process and results. With the exclusion of postgraduate education from some assessments, postgraduate students are unaware of how the government or institutions assure their education quality.

On the contrary, the global university rankings created by commercial agents earn significant popularity worldwide. Section 2.4.2 has presented many adverse side effects and uncertainties of the global university rankings. If these rankings neither focus on providing prospective students with the information they need nor contribute to institutional quality, then what other alternative information providers do international students need to be informed with the correct information and be the rational consumers as the marketisation of HE requests?

Deeper political, social and economic forces are witnessed in the proliferation of university rankings. Rankings have been associated with human capital and the rule of market forces, and an idealised rational consumer. Rankings are also ways in which power can be exerted – whoever controls the rankings can subtly direct institutions and, to some extent, governments. It then becomes a symbolic power for the nation to promote its HE hierarchy. It allows students and parents to focus instrumentally and seek international higher education as a marker of distinction. They are interested in acquiring a credential which signifies something about them, and that signifier is far more important to them than the intrinsic aspects of the educational experience. Rankings, therefore, reflect the search for both institutional and individual distinction.

Section 2.5 has reviewed the for and against the consumerist approach to HE and the discourse of students as consumers. Although some have presented the advantages of considering students as consumers, the empirical evidence to support this is questionable. In contrast, existing research with various data from different nations shows that students do not fully adopt a consumer identity role regardless of whether fees are charged or the length and depth of marketisation. Some previous studies show that students are highly aware of consumerism in higher education. They understand that the conception has reshaped their relationship with institutions and academic staff. Students who pay tuition fees consider they have more power to influence how education is arranged and delivered. For example, institutions require students to fill in evaluation forms, and the surveys also reinforce students' awareness of contributing to governing their educational process.

The debate is centred around “Can students be consumers?” instead of “Are contemporary higher education students now ‘consumers?’” Although no firm evidence shows students perceive themselves as consumers, their concerns about value for money and employability frequently surface in empirical research. Regarding specific aspects of higher education, students’ perceptions can be a paradox, for example, how to balance the conflict between self-transformative learning and instrumental goals. As Tomlinson (2015, 2017) states, students are in an ambivalent position with values and identities that co-exist on the subject. Although students’ perspectives on the subject have gained increasing scholarly attention, international students’ perceptions remain largely unknown. As international students form a substantial part of higher education internationally, and many institutions and nations have benefited economically and culturally, it is important to construct them accurately at the policy and practice level. Engaging international students with the debate of students as consumers and the impacts of marketisation will provide new insights on better understanding them to policymakers and educators. Besides increasing the attention on students’ perspectives on student identity, their other social identities are reviewed in section 2.7. Discussing identity literature and different theoretical perspectives helps us understand the benefits of adopting an identity approach to education and learning. The common narratives around HE student identities are largely centred around the policy level, and student’s perceptions of their identity construction are under-researched. Therefore, asking students about their self-identification within UK HE will provide a comprehensive understanding of not only the identity of consumers but also other social identities and the relationships between them.

The next chapter introduces the conducted research approach to fulfil the research aim and address the research questions.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

The literature review chapter argues that neoliberal ideology has significantly influenced higher education in the UK. The free-market logic encourages students to be seen as consumers by the universities. However, Chinese students who come to the UK to study postgraduate taught courses might not be familiar with the mechanism of higher education in the UK. Furthermore, their Chinese cultural and social background closely associates them with a student identity in the school or university. Therefore, this project is designed to investigate their perceptions and understanding of consumerism and the consumer identity of higher education students within the UK context.

This chapter presents the methodology and methods applied to address the research question. The first sections (3.2) describe the research paradigm, question, and the participants. Section 3.3 explains the design rationalities and procedures of both survey and qualitative data interviews. Ethical considerations are outlined in section 3.4. The sample recruitment strategy (3.5) and the pilot study (3.6) are discussed. The procedures for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data are explained in section 3.7. The final two sections outline the strategies to analyse the data and its trustworthiness by revealing my role in this research.

### 3.2 Research approach – mixed methods research

This section reveals the process and rationality to choose mixed methods research approach to address the main research question:

**How do Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students perceive the identity of student-as-consumer in UK universities?**

and the sub research questions:

- a) What are their motivations and expectations (including those of their parents) from their studies in the UK?
- b) How do they approach their studies and interact with their teaching staff in the UK?
- c) How do they perceive the marketisation of UK higher education and the impacts of the market practice on their lives and studies?

- d) How do they (re)construct their identities within UK higher education and perceive their relationships with the UK government, their universities, and teaching staff?

### **3.2.1 The rationality of the selected research approach**

Research approaches are “plans and the procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p.25), and it includes three main approaches: qualitative research, quantitative research and mixed methods research. Each approach has three main components: philosophical assumptions, research designs and research methods.

The term ‘worldview’: “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p.17) is adopted by Creswell & Creswell (2017) to describe the philosophical ideas that influence the research practice, which need to be made explicit to justify the specific research approach is taken to address the research question or problem. The worldview refers to paradigms, epistemologies, ontologies, and broadly conceived research methodologies (ibid). Ontology refers to assumptions about the nature of reality. Epistemology is “how we know what we know” (Crotty, 1998, p.8). Finally, axiology refers to the value and value systems (Cohen et al, 2018). Four common and widely discussed worldviews exist postpositivism, constructivism, transformative and pragmatism.

Postpositivists often conduct quantitative research and believe a top-down reductive method to test hypotheses and focus on variable enable them to identify and assess the cause of a phenomenon. The researchers commonly start with a theory and collect data to test the theory. The numeric results support or refute the theory (Cohen et al, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Constructivists are typically associated with qualitative research. The inquirers believe that multiple realities constructed the world and individual’s understanding, and experiences are worth exploring to study a situation or a phenomenon. Open-ended questioning is often conducted to allow individuals to reflect on subjective meanings and negotiate within the interactions and discussions (ibid). Researchers pay attention to the context of the research question, participants’ background, and their own personal experience, knowledge and position. These influences are included when interpreting the results. Opposite to postpositivism, a bottom-up technic is adopted as the researchers do not begin with a theory but develop or generate a theory (ibid).

The transformative worldview is commonly seen as an approach to qualitative research. The research inquiry identifies a specific agenda focusing on improving participants’ lives or

empowering their voices and rights. The participants are commonly marginalised, and their perspectives are examined to solve specific issues and promote certain changes (Cohen et al, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Pragmatism is firmly positioned in conducting all relevant approaches to address the research question. The quantitative and qualitative approaches can be freely adopted to design the research and answer the question. The inductive and deductive techniques combination enables to meet inquirers' research purposes and provides a more comprehensive analysis (ibid).

This study adopts a pragmatic position with fixed mixed methods design, meaning “the use of quantitative and qualitative methods is predetermined and planned at the start of the research process, and the procedures are implemented as planned” (Creswell & Clark, 2018, p.108). The pragmatic positioning seeks what works the best, and the quickest way to reach more participants is applying a quantitative approach to collect their opinions on consumer orientation toward higher education. In addition, a qualitative approach ensures that the participants' experience, meanings, and understanding of the research question would be studied and understood. The quantitative design involves survey research, which provides a numeric description of participants' attitudes and opinions. The survey is used to assess the frequency of Chinese students holding the consumer's orientation and their preference of identification by themselves, and how they view themselves to be identified by the three main stakeholders: the UK government, their HEIs and their teaching staff. The qualitative with narrative research to engage with individuals' stories and experiences. Integrating both approaches aim to reduce the disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative approaches by letting one form of database further explain the other. The different questions are designed through mixed methods research to explore different angles of the research question and meet the nature of the complexity of students' views on the concept of students as consumers.

### **3.2.1.1 The participants**

Having participants with undergraduate study experience in China is ideal for comparing their higher education experiences in China and the UK. Chinese students who have had over 16 years of education in China experienced an education system situated in Chinese social, cultural, economic, and political systems. The difference is hoped to bring new dimensions for the debate of students as consumers within the context of neoliberalism and the marketisation of UK higher education. Therefore, the participants must fulfil two criteria:

- a) Completed school education and undergraduate education in China; *and*
- b) are studying or completed their PGT taught courses in the UK.

### **3.2.1.2 The challenges of mixed methods research**

There are some common challenges associated with the mixed methods research design. Firstly, the resources needed for extensive data collection may become a limitation of the research design. The solution to having sufficient resources is looking for the most efficient ways to recruit the participants. Therefore, I used a popular Chinese social media platform: Xiaohongshu, to recruit the target samples (detailed in section 3.5.1).

The second significant challenge is the time-intensive nature of data collection and analysis. The solutions for addressing the challenge were conducting a convergent design and adopting an existing survey with 19 items to test students' consumer orientation designed by Saunders (2015).

## **3.3 Research design**

### **3.3.1 Concurrent design**

#### **3.3.1.1 Definition**

This study applies a concurrent design (convergent or parallel design). The researchers collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative databases separately at the same phase. The concurrent design intends to compare or combine the emergent results of two databases for a complete understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

#### **3.3.1.2 Philosophical assumptions and theory**

Creswell & Clark (2018) suggest that researchers who use the concurrent design work from pragmatism, which provides an umbrella worldview for the research study. This study was affected by the pandemic, and there were many restrictions regarding data collection. Therefore, the concurrent design situated the actual situation the best. It became a practical tool to collect both sets of data at the same time. It saved time, making the mixed methods research feasible within the scale. Regarding theory use, the authors indicate that applying a theoretical orientation in a concurrent design provides an umbrella theoretical or conceptual model to inform data collection and analysis and the researcher's approach to integrating the two sets of results.

#### **3.3.1.3 Strengths and challenges**

The concurrent design is efficient as both datasets are collected at the same phase. The comparison between the two datasets allows the researchers to enrich the research and enhance the complexity of the research. The design challenges might be the issues of different sample sizes and the

complexity of meaningfully merging two sets of very different data and their results. In addition, an extra explanation is needed when the divergence appears at the phase of data comparison. The disadvantage is that the research misses the opportunity for one phase to inform the design of the other.

### **3.3.2 Design procedures**

This study applied the concurrent design, including quantitative data collection with a survey and qualitative data collection with semi-structured interviews. The survey aimed to provide descriptive figures of Chinese students' consumer orientation towards their PG education. The interviews aimed to have an in-depth discussion and explanation for the same questions. The aim is to compare and combine the two results to understand the research question better. The following section details the survey and interview design procedures.

#### **3.3.2.1 Survey design**

The following four parts form a survey (details please see Appendix A):

Part one collects participants' demographic data, which are gender, age range, ethnic group, city and funding source, institution and major for both undergraduate and postgraduate, the year of postgraduate completion, and parents' higher education background.

Part two inquiries about the students' reasons for choosing to study abroad, choosing the UK as a destination and choosing the specific institution, and what elements form a postgraduate course with good value for money.

Part three contains 19 items from Saunders' (2015) survey to examine if participants from an American university see themselves as consumers of higher education. Minor adjustments and changes based on the feedback from a professional translator and pilot study have been made to tailor the context of Chinese postgraduate students in UK universities.

Part four extends the exploration of student-as-consumer identity to the other five identities: international student, learner, academic partner, Chinese and foreigner. There are two reasons why additional identities are provided for respondents to select other than the consumer identity. Firstly, this study recognises that students can possess multiple identities. The additional options allow students to identify themselves quickly according to their preferences. Second, although



individuals can occupy multiple identities, they have a prominent hierarchy of their identities (Burke & Stets, 2009). Therefore, students can prioritise an identity to reflect their relationship with different HE stakeholders.

The rationalities of choosing these particular identities are based on the discussion of university student identity (see section 2.7). The existing literature primarily argues that students should be identified as learners and academic partners rather than consumers. Therefore, learners and academic partners are selected as optional identity choices. Chinese participants are legally and socially categorised as international students. Foreigner is an identity chosen to represent the participants' non-British nationality and non-citizenship, especially when all the participants who attended the pilot study refer to others apart from Chinese and Chinese students as foreigners and self-addressed as foreigners. The participants are asked about their preference and rejection of these identities and what they consider to be identified by three main actors: the UK government, the university, and the teaching staff. Additional to the survey results, the interviews will allow students to explain their identities in detail; the survey thus focuses on students' top placement of identity in the prominence hierarchy when they are asked to define their relationship with the UK government, university and teaching staff.

### **Language**

The survey was designed in English and then translated into Chinese, the participant's first language, to ensure they better understood the questions and used less time for the completion. In addition, an expert review of the translation was done to ensure its accuracy. The translation process was straightforward. No essential meanings of words or phrases were missing out due to the translation.

### **Survey tool: Qualtrics**

Online software: Qualtrics, was chosen to administer the survey. There are three reasons for choosing Qualtrics:

- 1) It was paid for by the university, so there was zero direct cost for me to use.
- 2) I aimed to collect data from 1000 participants who were located both in China and the UK within three months. Therefore, only online software could achieve this feasibility.
- 3) Qualtrics was easy to use in design and distribution and automatically recorded all the responses.
- 4) Participants in the pilot study tried the tool and found it easy to use either by their phones or computers.

### **3.3.2.2 Interview design**

Semi-structured interviews were designed with some pre-determined topics drawn from the literature. The qualitative approach allowed all the participants to develop their ideas, speak more widely on the questions raised (Denscombe, 2017), and enabled me to probe for more detailed responses and seek clarification on what the respondent had said (Gray et. al, 2014). This inductive approach addressed the limitation of open-ended questions in the survey, where there was insufficient opportunity to seek clarification or understanding.

The interviews followed a thematic overview and sequencing of the questions (Appendix B: Interview Protocol). The interview questions were not highly structured with closed questions or completely unstructured. Instead, the participants were able to respond to a range of themes and added their other aspects of experiences and stories beyond the themes.

#### **Interview topics**

The following ten topics guided through all the interviews:

- 1) Educational biography and trajectory in China and the UK
- 2) Push and pull factors of studying in the UK
- 3) Expectations and motivations in both systems
- 4) Overall Satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the PG experience
- 5) Views of teaching and learning in both systems
- 6) Challenges and coping strategy of studying the master's in the UK
- 7) Understanding of the student as consumer identity and other identifications
- 8) Attitudes toward fees and their impact in both systems
- 9) Attitudes towards the marketisation and commercialisation of UK higher education
- 10) Plans and interests after the graduation from UG and PG respectively

During the design phase, specific components such as students' expectations, identity preferences and consumer orientation were embedded in both survey and interview designs to look for convergence. Having certain topics/elements to guide the survey and the interview design coherently helped reduce the messiness of mixed methods, especially in presenting findings.

## **Language**

Mandarin Chinese was used to conduct the interviews. It is the mother tongue of the participants and mine too. Therefore, the accuracy and preciseness of asking and answering questions were better achieved than using English. The translation of the survey items was double checked by a Chinese language lecturer to confirm accuracy. The translation of the interviews content was also given second view by a professional translator.

There were two words which require attention: teacher and school. In China, teacher is a general term to describe teaching staff in different levels of education, including higher education. Therefore, it is common to see ‘teacher’ used by the participants and the thesis to refer to teaching staff in the university. School is also a general term used to describe different levels of education entities, including universities. Therefore, some participants tend to use schools to refer to their universities.

## **Interview tool: Zoom**

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, interviewing was restricted to online only. Therefore, Zoom was used to conduct the interviews, and the content was recorded in audio and video when the participants were willing to turn on their cameras. In the latter case, the video record was deleted after fully completing the transcribing.

## **3.4 Ethical considerations**

All participants and their thoughts are core to this research. However, my research design and approach should prioritise their rights and satisfy the University of York ethics procedures. This study followed the ethical procedures of the Department of Education, University of York. The department Ethics Committee approved my ethical application before conducting my research. The consent form for the survey (See Appendix A part 1), and the consent form and project information sheet for the second stage of interviews are attached as Appendix C and D.

The following section outlines what were identified as the primary ethical implications.

- 1) Minimising harm. The potential risks to the participants taking part in this research were assessed. The risks were considered low in relation to both the researcher and the participants. All participants were over 18 years old and had the mental capacity to provide consent. Prior to any interview, a participant received two documents: the consent form

and the project information sheet. They were asked to read through all the information and sign the consent form when they fully understood the study's procedures and intent.

- 2) Right to withdraw. All participants were informed in the project information sheet and prior to the interview that they have the right to withdraw from the study before, during or after the data collection.
- 3) Privacy. All data were treated with the strictest confidence, and all data were anonymised.
- 4) Data protection. All data and personal information obtained via informed consent were treated according to the Data Protection rules of University of York. All recordings and transcripts are stored on a password-protected computer.

### **3.4.1 Survey**

The first page of the survey contains all the content of the consent form. Participants read the page and knew the intent of the research, the right they have, the usage of the information they give etc. and gave their consent before they continued to participate in the survey. The survey was anonymous, and Qualtrics did not record any personal information. Therefore, after the participants submitted the survey, they could not withdraw their responses.

### **3.4.2 Interview**

Bell (2010) states that researchers are responsible for explaining fully to participants what the research is about, the intention in interviewing them, the entire process of the interview, and the usage of the information they provided. Apart from the project sheet I gave to them prior to the interview, I also offered them an opportunity to ask questions when we started the interview. The participants had the right to decline the interview or decline to answer some of the questions. Showing the participants that I cared and respected their choice and opinions were vital to the research integrity and further help building good rapport and trust at the start of the interviews. The confidentiality of their information was reassured to make sure they were comfortable speaking openly and freely.

Although all my participants are adults and willingly contributed their thoughts to my research subject, I was aware that we were in an unprecedented situation: the Covid-19 pandemic. Having this project, during the pandemic, Chinese students who were impacted by either stuck in China doing online courses or stuck in the UK for fear of not being able to go home and being discriminated against. Therefore, I sympathised with their experience. In addition, I considered the likelihood of the richness of responses because I was aware that participants might use the

interview as an opportunity to vent or off-load any frustrations they may have about the study and life experience while studying a British master's course.

### **3.5 Participant recruitment procedures**

#### **3.5.1 Recruitment social media platform: Xiaohongshu**

Xiaohongshu is an app with a website: [xiaohongshu.com](http://xiaohongshu.com), launched in 2013 in Shanghai, initially focusing on overseas shopping experiences. It was evaluated as over \$3 billion when it completed series D<sup>3</sup> fundraising in 2018. With a mission to “inspire” lives, Xiaohongshu has become a popular platform for people to inspire each other by sharing their experiences, from fitness, travel, and childcare to education. The formats allow its users to text, livestream, share photos and videos, build group discussions, and live chat. The official data from the company shows that over 100 million monthly users actively used the platform in July 2020, and the number increased to over 200 million in October 2021 (Xiaohongshu, 2023).

#### **3.5.2 The journey of turning my account into the best resource**

I joined Xiaohongshu in September 2019, and shared non-academic content with six posts between 2019 to October 2020. It was used as a tool to discover and learn from other people's experiences on the subjects that I was interested in such as studying in the UK and PhD daily life in the UK. I could always find helpful information from other students who studied in the UK, sharing their personal experiences with high quality content and some of them attracted thousands of followers. In October 2020, I was few months near the second year of my PhD study and started to discuss research design and data collection with my supervisors. As it was the start of pandemic and lockdowns limiting human contacts was common, the normality of life inside and outside the campus was paused. Bearing social networking with PhD students and academia in mind, I started to document my PhD journey with ups and downs on the account. I also spotted hashtags such as #studyintheuk, #ukpostgrad, each had over 4 million posts. Therefore, I created content closely related to my master's study experience in the UK. When my research design was completed, the data collection rule was restricted to online only. My social media account accumulated around 8000 followers, and most were either studying or planning to apply to study in the UK. Therefore, after assessing other recruitment strategies, such as distributing the recruitment advertisement through university email and snowballing technique, I considered the

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<sup>3</sup> “Series D funding is the fourth stage of fundraising that a business completes after the seed stage” (Reiff,2023).

best way to recruit participants was through Xiaohongshu. Having a one-year user experience, I realised my target participants are active users who interact, ask and answer questions and create their content on the platform. Therefore, I decided to use the platform as my main recruitment path. As I was fully aware of the possibility of using the account to recruit participants, I never shared any content related to my research. The followers only know that my research area is higher education. Any potential direction or narrative influence on the participants' answers from looking at my account had been minimised. Therefore, I was confident that my account on Xiaohongshu would become the most resourceful platform for collecting data in quantitative and qualitative research.

### **3.5.3 Recruitment result**

There were two advertisements I posted on the platform. The first one was recruiting participants for the survey pilot study on 4th November 2021 (see Appendix E, post 1). The second one was for recruiting survey and interviewing participants on 29th November 2021 (see Appendix E, post 2). There were seven participants recruited for the pilot study on the same day the advertisement was posted. There were 77 potential participants interested in taking part in the interviews between 29th November 2021 to 1st February 2022. Due to the criteria requirement and seeking diverse participants, 51 of them were recruited for the formal interview, and five of them took part in the pilot interview study.

## **3.6 Pilot study**

### **3.6.1 Pilot study for survey**

After completing the survey design, a pilot study was needed to test out the feasibility and validity of the survey. First, in terms of the technical aspect, the pilot study allowed me to test the software Qualtrics. The aims were to test if the survey link could be sent and opened easily, if the content could display clearly on both phone and computer devices and if the responses could be recorded. Second, in terms of the actual content, the pilot study collected feedback on the length of time participants needed to complete, their opinions on the clarity, structure and format, level of complexity and any other suggestions.

#### **3.6.1.1 Pilot study and procedures**

As mentioned above, I posted the advertisement on Xiaohongshu on 4th November 2021. I had seven responders on the same day. I checked their qualifications for participation and arranged a meeting with each of them. The pilot study was conducted on the 6th and 7th November 2021.

The procedures were that I called them one by one through Zoom audio or video call (they were free to choose). The approach of cognitive interviewing/ ‘speak aloud’ was used (Beatty & Willis, 2007). They asked questions while they completed the survey. I answered and took notes. A pre-prepared feedback survey was used to collect feedback (See Appendix F).

### **3.6.1.2 Pilot study feedback and adjustment**

After completing the pilot study, I analysed all the feedback and summed up detailed feedback (See Appendix F). Overall, the Qualtrics survey worked well, and the content had no significant issues. However, the participants found it exciting and expected it to be longer. Therefore, a few questions were added for collecting more demographic data. Three more questions were added for collecting participants’ opinions regarding the identifications of three stakeholders: university, teacher, and the UK government.

### **3.6.2 Pilot study for interviews**

The pilot study for interviews was conducted on 30th November 2021. I tested out the initial interview schedule with five participants in a pilot study prior to the formal interviews. With the practice with five participants, I established a feasible interview style that allowed me to achieve rich data. In addition, I learned how to build trust with participants and give them enough space to express their opinions and their unique experience guided by the setting themes.

These five interviews were not included in the final data with the intent of practising and getting feedback in mind, which would cause potential differences with a formal setting. In order to increase the validity, the five interview scripts were not included in the final data. However, their feedback on my interview skills and questions significantly improved the final interview protocol. Regarding the actual questions and interview agenda, five participants had no issue understanding and forming their answers. The flow went well, and rich data was collected, which boosted my confidence that the formal interviews would go well. Although no additional themes were added after the analysis of the interview data, some of the questions were refined. The pilot study also trained me to be ready to be flexible as every individual’s experience, insights, and understanding vary. I needed to be ready to be spontaneous if I wanted more and more profound answers from them. The pilot study also offered a clear idea of the average time of an interview, which was 55 to 65 minutes.

## 3.7 Data collection and participant demographics

### 3.7.1 Survey

After the pilot study was completed, the survey was distributed on 29th November 2021 through Qualtrics. Qualtrics recorded two hundred fifty survey responses from 29th November to 28th December 2021. Due to the time limitation and not too many responses, I asked thirty interviewees from different universities to kindly post the recruitment advertisement on the WeChat groups they were part of. In my and the thirty interviewees' experience, most of our Chinese peers have joined at least three WeChat groups before starting their postgraduate course in the UK:

- 1) A group of all the Chinese postgraduate students enrolled at the university at the same time, the number of group members usually hits the maximum of 500.
- 2) A group for all the students who study the same major.
- 3) At least one group is for sharing travelling advice, second-hand goods etc., usually having 500 members.

Therefore, Qualtrics received another 800 responses between 29th December and 20th February. The total response was 1050, but 202 completed less than 15% or were not qualified. Therefore, 848 were completed and valid.

#### 3.7.1.1 Survey participant demographics and sample representativeness

Table 3.7.1.2 (a)&(b) presents survey participants' (n=848) demographics, including age, gender, PG institutions' categories and subject areas, and the same information and percentage of the overall PGT student population in 2020/21. The survey participants aged between 22 and 30, with 94.8%, while the whole population aged between 21 and 29, had 96.6%. The female participants comprised 77.2% of the survey compared to 65.1% of the population. 81.3% of participants studied in Golden Triangle<sup>4</sup> or Russell Group compared with 78.7% of the population. Regarding subject areas, 30% of survey participants studied Business & Administrative Studies, while 42.3% of the population studied Business & Management subjects. There is another difference in that 21% of survey participants studied Education, compared with 6.5% of the whole cohort.

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<sup>4</sup> "The 'golden triangle' of Oxford, Cambridge and certain London institutions emerges as a distinct elite" (Wakeling & Savage, 2015, p.290).



Although the survey sample was collected through a convenient route, the majority of the demographics presented a high level of representativeness. The limitation is that some categories need accurate representativeness, which can be altered in future studies if generalisation is required.

SURVEY DATA		HESA DATA	
Age Range	Percentage	Age on 31 August	Percentage
18-21	2.5%	18 years and under	0.0%
22-25	77.5%	19 years	0.1%
26-30	17.2%	20 years	0.7%
31 and above	2.8%	21-24 years	81.4%
		25-29 years	15.2%
		30 years and over	2.7%
Gender		Sex	
Female	77.2%	Female	65.1%
Male	21.9%	Male	34.8%
Non-binary	0.8%	Other	0.1%
PG Institutions		Russell Group filter	
Golden Triangle	11.8%	Golden Triangle	18.0%
Russell Group	69.5%	Other Russell Group	60.7%
Other Universities	17.8%	Non-member	21.2%
Unknown	0.9%		

*Table 3.7.1.2 (a) Comparison between survey participants and the overall PGT population (20/21)*

SURVEY DATA		HESA DATA	
PG HESA Subject Areas	Percentage	CAH level 1 subject of module	Percentage
Medicine & dentistry	0.5%	(01) Medicine and dentistry	0.3%
Subjects allied to medicine	1.4%	(02) Subjects allied to medicine	0.9%
Biological sciences	1.7%	(03) Biological and sport sciences	0.6%
		(04) Psychology	0.8%
Agriculture & related subjects	0.7%	(05) Veterinary sciences	0.0%
		(06) Agriculture, food and related studies	0.3%
Physical Sciences	1.7%	(07) Physical sciences	0.7%
Mathematical sciences	0.5%	(09) Mathematical sciences	2.9%
Engineering & technology	2.8%	(10) Engineering and technology	8.7%
Computer science	3.7%	(11) Computing	4.7%
Architecture, building & planning	2.8%	(13) Architecture, building and planning	3.0%
Social studies	10.3%	(15) Social sciences	8.9%
Law	2.2%	(16) Law	2.2%
Business & administrative studies	30.0%	(17) Business and management	42.3%
Languages	2.2%	(19) Language and area studies	2.4%
Historical & philosophical studies	0.7%	(20) Historical, philosophical and religious studies	0.7%
Education	21.0%	(22) Education and teaching	6.5%
		(23) Combined and general studies	0.4%
Mass communications & documentation	7.0%	(24) Media, journalism and communications	5.1%
Creative arts & design	5.5%	(25) Design, and creative and performing arts	7.4%
		(26) Geography, earth and environmental studies (natural sciences)	0.7%
		(26) Geography, earth and environmental studies (social sciences)	0.3%
Unknown	1.4%		

**Table 3.7.1.2 (b) Subjects group comparison between survey participants and the overall PGT population (20/21)**

### **3.7.2 Interviews**

Before the formal interview, an email with the consent form and project information sheet was sent to the participants' email. The interview started with a response email with one signed consent form. None of the participants requested to see the transcripts of their interviews.

I started the first interview on 1st December 2021. The interviews were carried out at the participant's convenience. It went very well. The participant was very engaged and showed great interest to answer all the questions. Most of the interviews had the same dynamic. However, there were a few where I needed to work very hard to probe the answers. When I hit the target number 25, I found out that the interviewees are primarily female. Therefore, the second phase of the interview focused on recruiting and interviewing male participants. During the recruitment process, I found that the students interested in participating in my research have some new elements, such as having two master's degrees either in the UK or one in China and the other in the UK. The common trait of the four prospective participants formed another new angle to answer my research question. Therefore, I continued to conduct the interviews until 20th February.

After adding more angles and conducting 51 interviews, saturation was reached when themes and answers repeatedly emerged, and no different perspectives came to light within the project's scope. It was important to be aware of when to stop collecting data. I took the advertisement off my social media account as more students messaged me their interest in participating. As I transcribed and listened back to the interviews and the process of conducting new interviews, I was confident that the data was sufficient to answer the main research question: do they see themselves as consumers? Why do they and why do they not?

#### **3.7.2.1 Recording and transcription**

Participants were informed that recording the interview is a part of the consent. Due to the pandemic restriction, Zoom was the software used to conduct the interviews. I explained to the participants that they had the right to leave the camera on or off and choose to be recorded only audibly through an individual recording device. I will have both video and audio documents for those who agreed to be recorded through Zoom with their webcam on. I explained to these participants that the video would be deleted after the completion of transcription. The point was also emphasised in the consent form. Both video and voice recordings were directly uploaded to a password-protected computer and securely stored within a password-protected storage space.

The recording was essential to achieving the level of in-depth analysis that the interview part required. The recordings allowed me to listen back and forth when transcribing the interviews and analysing the data. Having total concentration on the interview itself was very important. Therefore, I only made key points in a notebook I used during the interviews. The notes were used along with the transcription.

Good practice suggests that interviews should be transcribed as soon as possible after being recorded (Gillham, 2000). Most of the interviews lasted 55 to 65 minutes and took five hours to transcribe and another hour to read thoroughly and edit fully.

### **3.7.2.2 Interview participant demographics**

The majority of interview participants (n=51) were aged between 22 and 25, and a small percentage (3.9%) of students aged above 31 and 74.5% were female. The participants' home cities are spread nearly evenly across four tiers. Compared with 80.7% of them studying PG at either Russell Group or Golden Triangle universities in the UK, only 31.4% of them studied in either Project 985<sup>5</sup> & 211 or Project 211 universities in China. To further illustrate the difference among these universities, all the Golden Triangle and Russell Group institutions are ranked as Top 200 world-university. In contrast, only 8 out of Project 985 and Project 211<sup>6</sup> universities are ranked as Top 200-university (QS, 2021). For more details interview participant demographics please see Appendix G.

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<sup>5</sup> “China’s 985 Project, which came after the 211 Project, is a key program of the Chinese government to create world-class universities and high-level research universities. The central government invested a total of RMB32.9 billion in special funds for phase I (1999-2001) and phase II (2004-2007) of the project, assisting thirty-nine universities” (Cheng, 2011, p.19).

<sup>6</sup> “Project 211 is a project which aims to strengthen approximately 100 key universities and colleges for the 21st century initiated in 1995 by China's Ministry of Education. The figure of 21 and 1 within the name 211 are from the abbreviation of the 21st century and approximately 100 universities respectively. China now has more than 2,000 standard institutions of higher education, and about 6 percent of them are 211 Project institutions” (CUCAS,2023).

Age Range	Percentage
22-25	72.5%
26-30	23.5%
31-35	3.9%
Gender	
Female	74.5%
Male	25.5%
City Tier	
Tier 1	25.5%
New Tier 1	31.4%
Tier 2	17.6%
Tier 3	23.5%
Not Included	2.0%
PGT Uni. Group	
Golden Triangle	19.2%
Russell Group	61.5%
Neither	19.2%
UG Uni. Group	
Project 985 & 211	15.7%
Project 211	15.7%
Neither	68.6%

*Table 3.7.2.2 (a) Interview participants demographics*

UG Major Subject Area	Percentage	PG Major Subject Area	Percentage
Agriculture & related subjects	2.0%	Agriculture & related subjects	1.8%
Architecture, building & planning	2.0%	Architecture, building & planning	3.6%
Biological sciences	2.0%	Business & administrative studies	18.2%
Business & administrative studies	25.5%	Combined	5.5%
Combined	5.9%	Creative arts & design	7.3%
Creative arts & design	11.8%	Education	23.6%
Education	7.8%	Engineering & technology	9.1%
Engineering & technology	3.9%	Historical & philosophical studies	1.8%
Languages	21.6%	Languages	7.3%
Mass communications & documentation	3.9%	Law	1.8%
Medicine & dentistry	3.9%	Mass communications & documentation	1.8%
Physical Sciences	3.9%	Physical Sciences	1.8%
Social studies	5.9%	Social studies	14.5%
		Subjects allied to medicine	1.8%

*Table 3.7.2.2 (b) Interview participants UG and PG subject areas*

## **3.8 Data analysis**

### **3.8.1 A convergent analysis approach**

I analysed both quantitative and qualitative data during the same timeframe due to the convergent method design which was adopted to conduct the research. As Moseholm & Fetters (2017) argues that a convergent method requires both set of designs matching and reflecting on the same theme and “constructs match on a domain by domain basis” (p.3), my research design and data collection followed a list of pre-explored themes. Therefore, the analysis on both sets of data used a “matching” approach (Moseholm & Fetters, 2017,p.2) with the intention of merging answers for similar questions. For example, the survey asked participants to choose three top reasons why they choose to study in the UK. The interview also asked participants to give detailed process and reasons why they choose to study in the UK. Therefore, the results from both data analysis were merged to answer the same question and presented under the theme ‘Motivations to study in the UK’ (section 4.2.3).

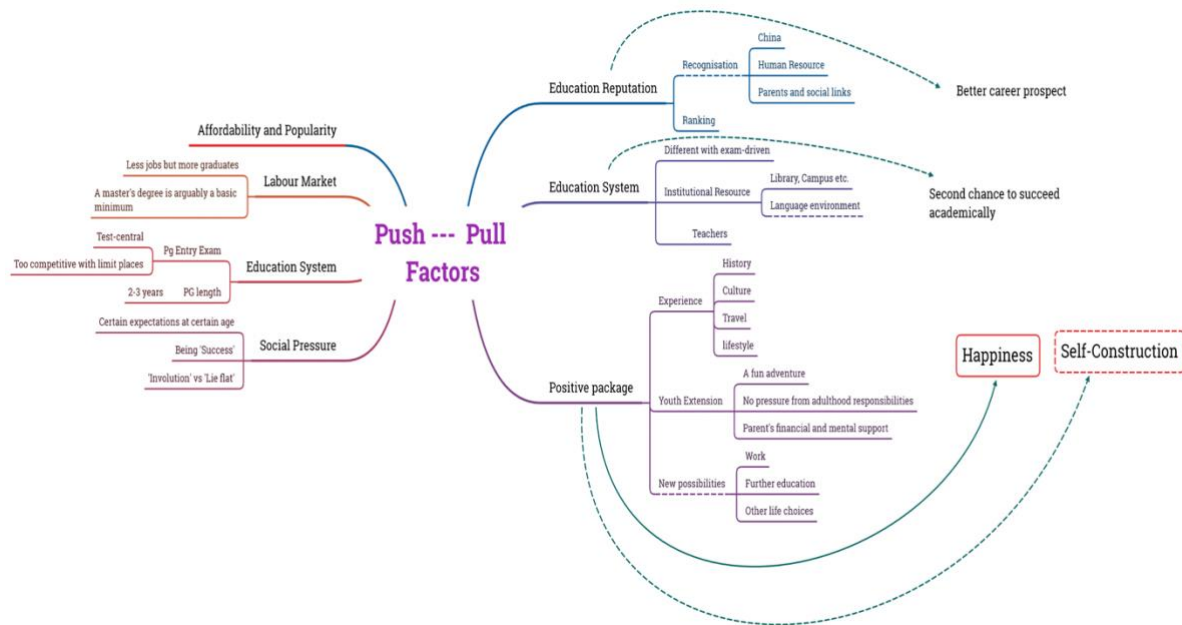
### **3.8.2 Qualitative data analysis**

#### **3.8.2.1 Thematic analysis method**

Thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Building on the concept, an inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the data. Fereday & Muri-Cochrane (2006) demonstrate the validity of the method within integrative mixed methods research and enabling philosophical paradigm. The merits and compatibility of the inductive/deductive hybrid thematic approach has also been proved by many researchers such as Hitchcock & Onwuegbuzie (2020) and Proudfoot (2023). The deductive element is through engaging with the literature, pre-ordinate themes are developed, and the inductive element entails the generation of themes from the data (Proudfoot, 2023).

I used NVivo 20 and Microsoft Word to store and organise 51 transcripts including English and Chinese versions. NVivo 20 was used to do the deductive coding (starting with a pre-set of codes and applied to the qualitative data) and structural coding (taking a large set of data and structure it under a same question/topic). 3.8.2.1 shows an example of some initial pre-set codes for students’ motivations. Word was used to do the inductive coding (coding the data without preconceived notions) and line by line coding (applying/generating codes to each line). The hybrid coding approach allowed me to highly focus through deal with a massive set of data at the beginning.

Through the deductive and structural coding with NVivo 20, raw qualitative data were organised and processed into different sections and each section centred around a topic. Applying the inductive coding and line by line coding helped me to dive into each section and generate new set of codes. In doing so, I believe that I captured the depth of my qualitative data.

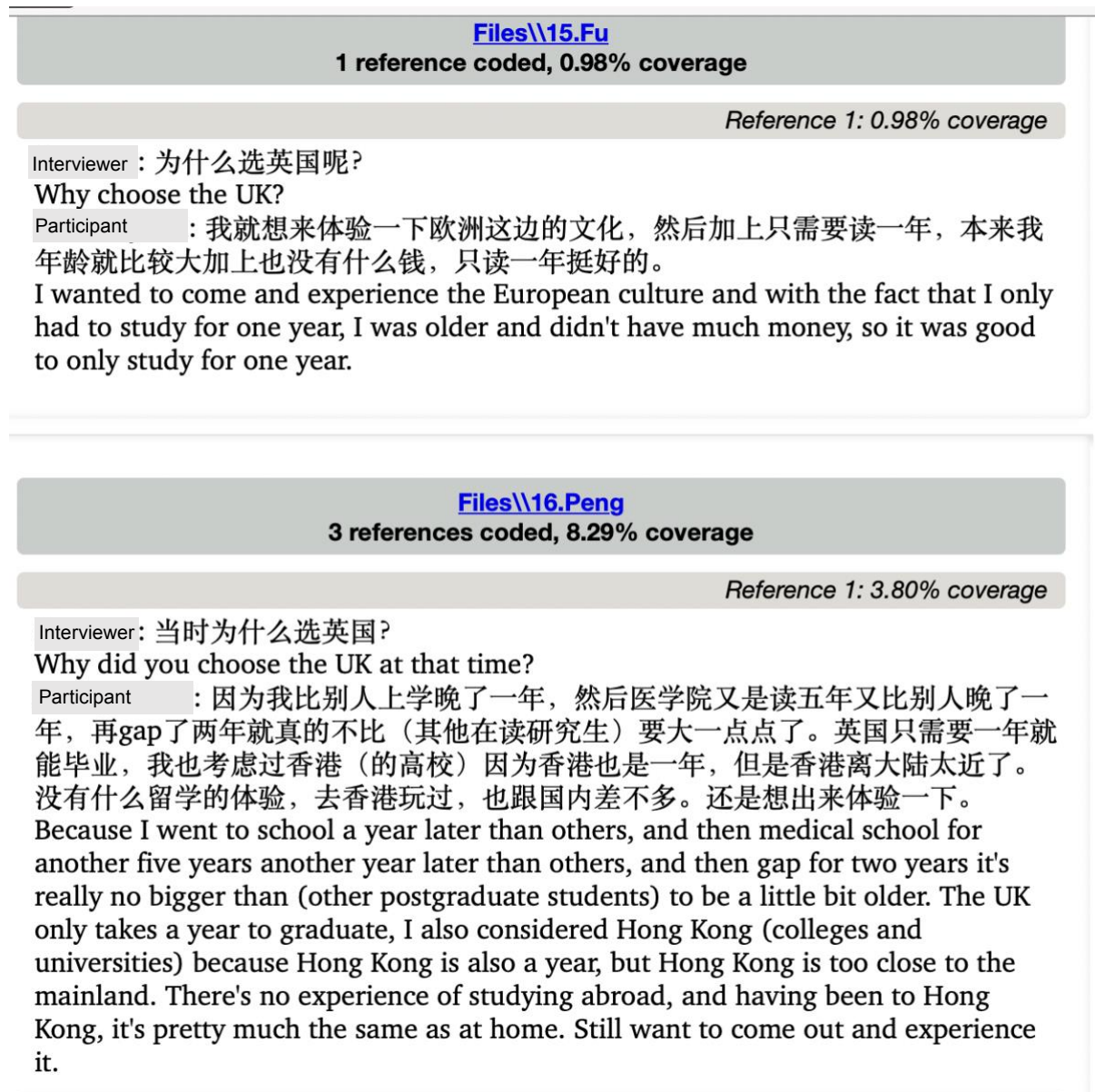


**Figure 3.8.2.1** an example of pre-set codes

### 3.8.2.2 The coding process and examples of codes applied

Each transcript was assigned a code, such as 01Wang for the first participant and its surname (a given name which protect participants' privacy). Firstly, the transcript was read and translated into English, but the Chinese was also kept making sure the accuracy throughout the whole data analysis. There were descriptive comments and thoughts writing along the transcribing which were noted in a linked memo on NVivo. After all the transcript was organised, the deductive coding took first place as a set pf pre-established codes generated from the general topic areas by reviewing the literature. Therefore, I first applied them to the interview transcripts. For example, 'motivations' was used to structural coding answers related to students' motivations. With a large data set, structural coding was useful as I could focus on label sections based on specific questions and located segments of data quickly. Therefore, all the answers related to motivation were coded under the 'motivations'. Then at the second round of initial coding stage, I applied codes such as 'motivations to study abroad'; 'motivations to study PG' and 'motivations to study in the UK' to the data under 'motivations' to identify more specific motivations. 3.8.2.2(a) shows an example of

structural coding which all the answers related to ‘motivations to study in the UK’ were coded into one section.



*Figure 3.8.2.2(a) an example of structural coding*

At the third round of initial coding stage, I applied the method of inductive coding to code each segment of data I generated from the first and second rounds. It helped to create a new set of codes based on the data itself. For example, 3.8.2.2(b) shows that an example of applying inductive coding to generate new codes with the section of ‘motivation to study in the UK’ that transferred from Nivo20 to Word. The inductive coding process generated new codes such as ‘age concern’, ‘culture experience’ and ‘one-year’, which were further applied to code the rest of transcripts.



[Files\15.Fu](#)  
1 reference coded, 0.98% coverage  
Reference 1: 0.98% coverage  
Interviewer: 为什么选英国呢? Why choose the UK? Participant : 我就想来体验一下欧洲这边的文化, 然后加上只需要读一年, 本来我年龄就比较大加上也没有什么钱, 只读一年挺好的。 I wanted to come and experience the European culture and with the fact that I only had to study for one year, I was older and didn't have much money, so it was good to only study for one year.

[Files\16.Peng](#)  
3 references coded, 8.29% coverage  
Reference 1: 3.80% coverage  
Interviewer: 当时为什么选英国? Why did you choose the UK at that time? Participant : 因为我比别人上学晚了一年, 然后医学院又是读五年又比别人晚了一年, 再 gap 了两年就真的不比(其他在读研究生)要大一点点了。英国只需要一年就能毕业, 我也考虑过香港(的高校)因为香港也是一年, 但是香港离大陆太近了。没有什么留学的体验, 去香港玩过, 也跟国内差不多。还是想出来体验一下。 Because I went to school a year later than others, and then medical school for another five years another year later than others, and then gap for two years it's really no bigger than (other postgraduate students) to be a little bit older. The UK only takes a year to graduate, I also considered Hong Kong (colleges and universities) because Hong Kong is also a year, but Hong Kong is too close to the mainland. There's no experience of studying abroad, and having been to Hong Kong, it's pretty much the same as at home. Still want to come out and experience.

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2 references coded, 9.12% coverage  
Reference 1: 5.83% coverage

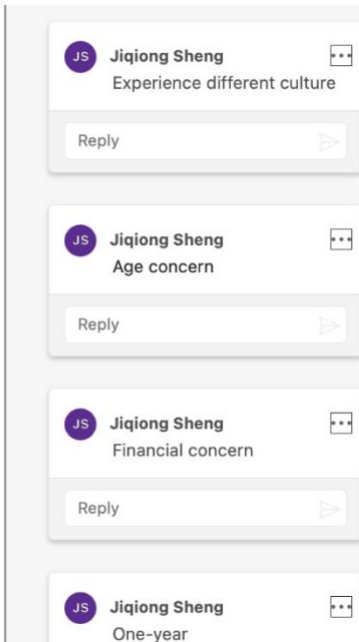


Figure 3.8.2.2(b) an example of inductive coding

The initial coding took several times to generate an overview of the data and achieve an understanding of the pre-set codes and the new developed set of codes. At the fourth stage, line by line coding was applied to delve deeper into the data and generated a more formal set of codes. 3.8.2.2(b) shows an example of applying the line-to-line coding to create new codes such as ‘Hong Kong’ and ‘European’.

[Files\15.Fu](#)  
1 reference coded, 0.98% coverage  
Reference 1: 0.98% coverage  
Interviewer: 为什么选英国呢? Why choose the UK? Participant : 我就想来体验一下欧洲这边的文化, 然后加上只需要读一年, 本来我年龄就比较大加上也没有什么钱, 只读一年挺好的。 I wanted to come and experience the European culture and with the fact that I only had to study for one year, I was older and didn't have much money, so it was good to only study for one year.

[Files\16.Peng](#)  
3 references coded, 8.29% coverage  
Reference 1: 3.80% coverage  
Interviewer: 当时为什么选英国? Why did you choose the UK at that time? Participant : 因为我比别人上学晚了一年, 然后医学院又是读五年又比别人晚了一年, 再 gap 了两年就真的不比(其他在读研究生)要大一点点了。英国只需要一年就能毕业, 我也考虑过香港(的高校)因为香港也是一年, 但是香港离大陆太近了。没有什么留学的体验, 去香港玩过, 也跟国内差不多。还是想出来体验一下。 Because I went to school a year later than others, and then medical school for another five years another year later than others, and then gap for two years it's really no bigger than (other postgraduate students) to be a little bit older. The UK only takes a year to graduate, I also considered Hong Kong (colleges and universities) because Hong Kong is also a year, but Hong Kong is too close to the mainland. There's no experience of studying abroad, and having been to Hong Kong, it's pretty much the same as at home. Still want to come out and experience.

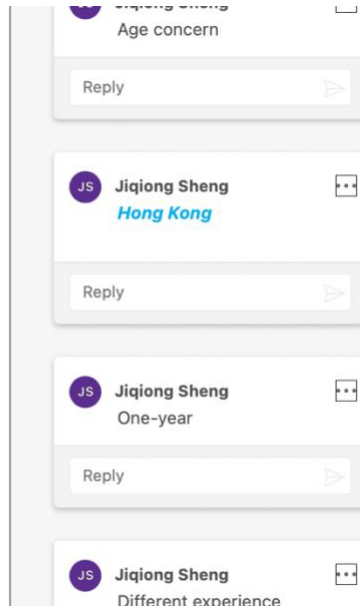


Figure 3.8.2.2(c) an example of line by line coding

After moving back and forth between different transcripts, detailed and specific codes were generated, and a better understanding of my data was achieved. The next step I moved to the analysis process by categorising the codes.

After pre-set codes were fully applied and the new codes were generated, I created code categories so that all the codes and data became more organised. For example, all codes such as ‘one-year’, ‘three-years’ were grouped into ‘programme length’. The code such as ‘cost’, ‘expensive’ and ‘tuition’ were grouped into ‘the cost’ and codes such as ‘Hong Kong’ and ‘European’ were grouped into ‘country comparison’. With the process of code categorisation, I could see clearly the connections between these different groups of codes. For example, the ‘programme length’ and ‘the cost’ are highly related as the both sets of data discussed the one-year programme length made the cost much cheaper, and the ‘three-years’ made the cost much more expensive.

It was natural to identify the themes through learning from the coding and categorisation stages. As noted above, there was a clear connection between the programme length and the cost, and the data coverage was high, therefore, ‘programme length and the cost’ became a subtheme under the pre-set main theme ‘motivations to study in the UK’. I applied the same techniques to the rest of the transcript to generate other subthemes such as ‘UK versus the USA, Australia, Canada...’ ‘culture and history’ ‘institutional ranking and reputation’ and ‘easy and flexible admission procedures’ to complete the identification for the main theme ‘motivations to study in the UK’. Articulating the themes from the data slowly made the picture clear and produced a narrative for each chapter to answer the research questions. For example, a main part of detailed explanation in Chapter 4 Chinese students’ motivations and expectations came up from the whole process of qualitative analysis.

### **3.8.3 Quantitative data analysis**

The quantitative data was imported from Qualtrics to Excel after the survey was completed in February 2022. Excel was the main tool to organise and analyse the quantitative data. The raw data includes four main parts: Part 1 students’ demographic data, Part 2 students motivations, Part 3 the consumer-orientation survey converted from Saunders (2015) and Part 4 students’ identity preference.

For Part 1 the demographic data the key characteristics were identified then separated to find the totals. Each was separated into a new pivot table where the count of each value could be found. 3.8.3(a) presents a part of demographic data analysis results. Every single element such as gender, age and study status were counted using pivot tables, and the percentages were calculated. Then graphs were generated to display frequencies of occurrence to assist a descriptive data analysis.

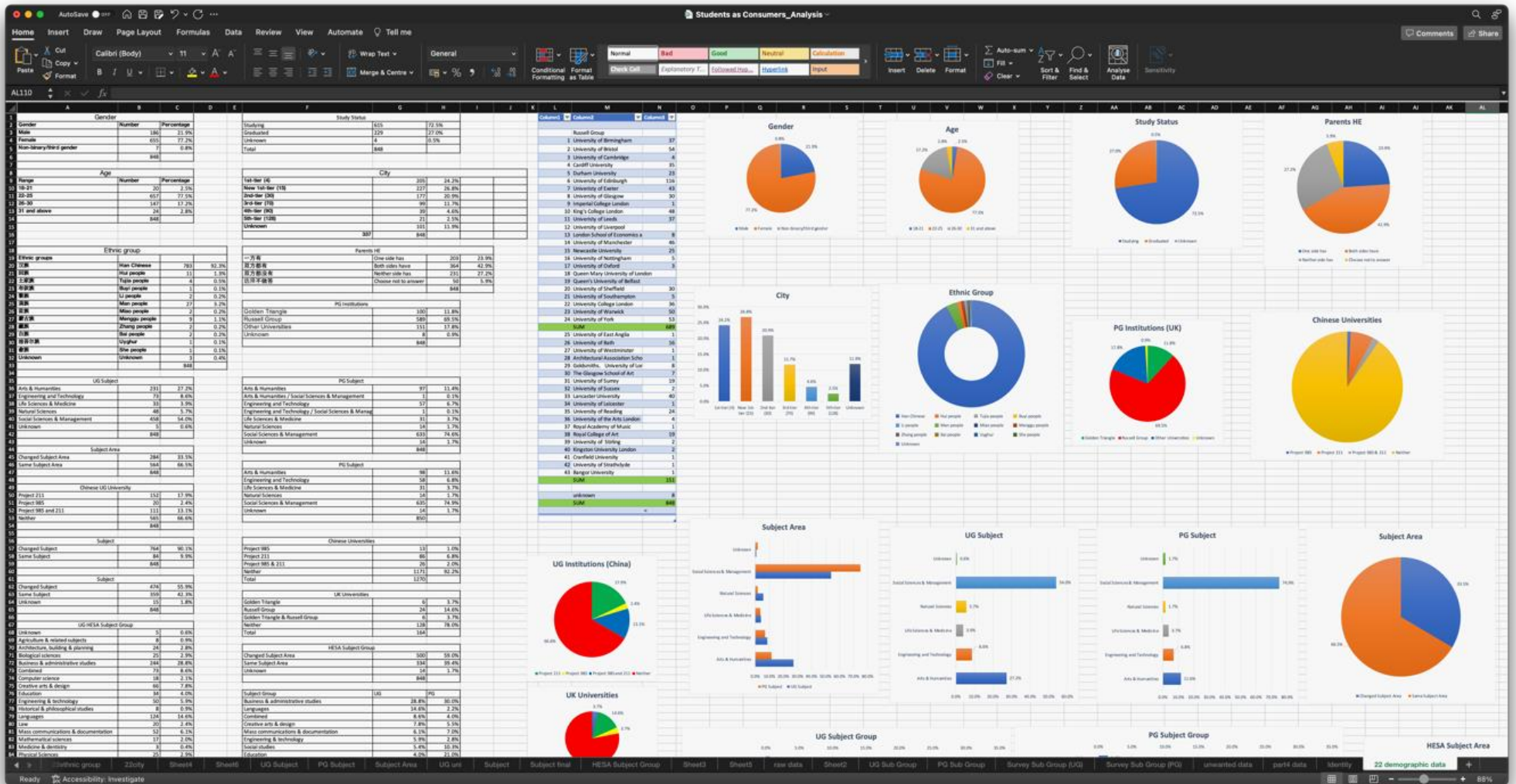


Figure 3.8.3 (a) demographic data analysis

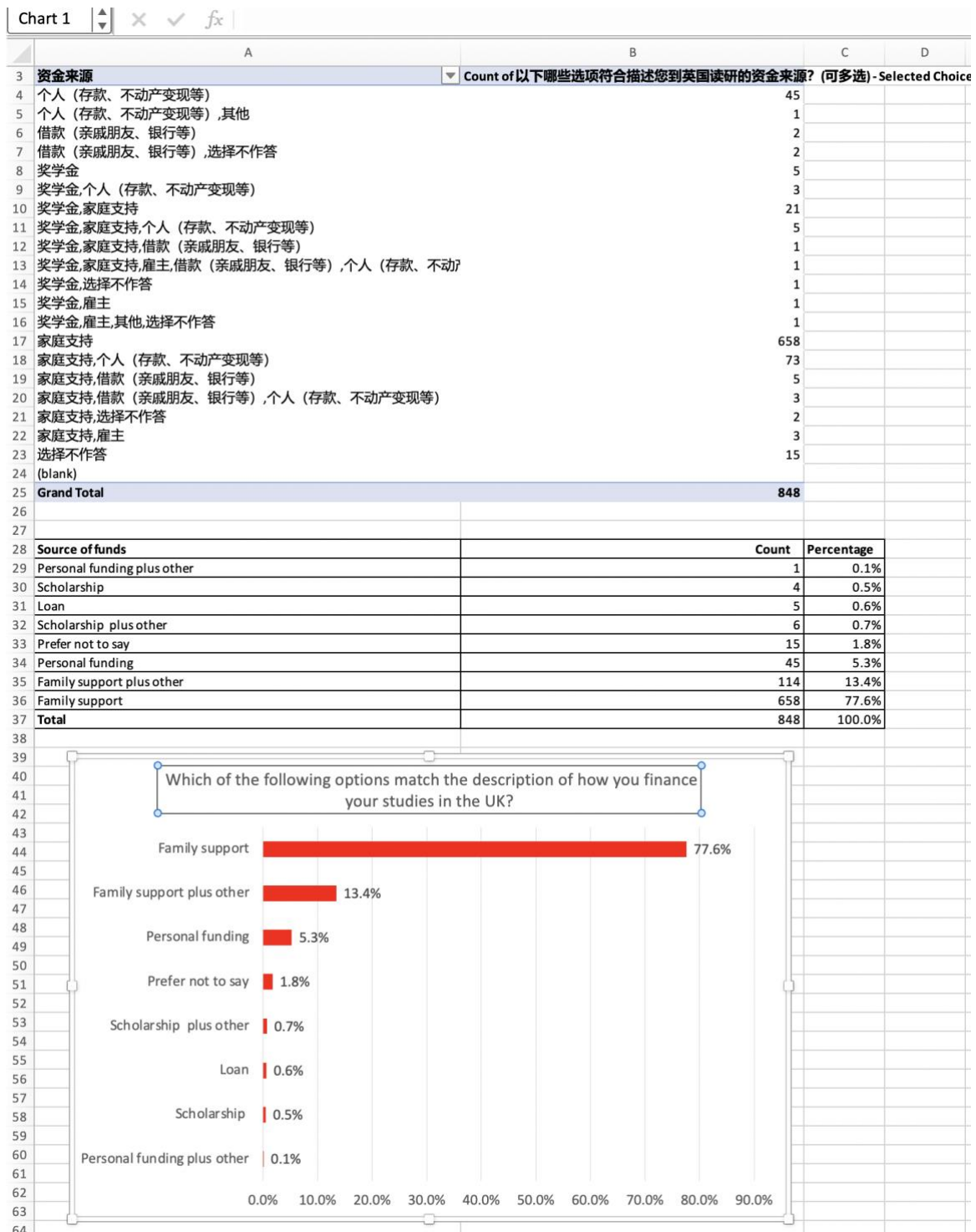


Figure 3.8.3 (b) Participants' funding resources analysis

3.8.3 (b) demonstrates the process of analysing every single question in the survey. The first step was selecting the question and answers from the raw data and translated into English. Then counting the frequency using pivot tables and calculating the percentage. A graph was then generated.



The screenshot displays an Excel spreadsheet titled "Students as Consumers\_Analysis". The spreadsheet is a large data table with columns labeled A through Z, representing different subject groups. The rows list various subjects, such as "Environmental Science", "International Finance", "Environmental Science", "International Business and Trade", "English", "Chemistry", "Physics", "Food Science", "Education", "Business Management", "Digital Business", "Early Childhood Education", "Environmental Engineering", "Physics", "Hotel Management AND English", "Accounting and Business management", "Finance", "English", "Urban/garden", "Performance", "Food Science and Nutrition", "Radio and Television Editing and Directing", "Financial service", "Education", "International Business and Trade", "English", "Finance", "Education AND International Business and Trade", "Chinese", "English", "International Chinese Education and Asian Research", "English and Education", "Material Science and Physics", "International Business and Trade", "Internet and New Media", "Radio and Television Editing and Directing", "Project Management", "International Business and Trade", "Economics", "Finance", "Accounting", "Human Resource Management", "Chinese Language and Literature AND Spanish", "English", "Maritime Law", "Business English", "Accounting", "Finance and Project Management", "Industrial Design", "Radio and Television Broadcasting", "Fine Arts Education", "English Translation", "Chinese as a Foreign Language", "International Chinese Education", "Radio and Television Editing and Directing", "Tourism and Human Geography", "Tourism Management", and "Applied Psychology".

The data cells in the table are filled with "TRUE" or "FALSE" values, indicating the presence or absence of each subject in each of the subject groups (A-Z). The spreadsheet interface includes a ribbon with "Home", "Insert", "Draw", "Page Layout", "Formulas", "Data", "Review", and "View" tabs. The status bar at the bottom shows "Ready" and "Accessibility: Investigate".

Figure 3.8.3 (b) an example of coding subject groups

Coding was required to analyse some parts of data. For example, the participant’s undergraduate subjects were categorised into those as designated by HESA subject groups. There was a significant number of different subjects due to the large selection of available courses, universities having different names for subjects, and participant spelling errors. The coding involved using functions to search for keywords in the participants subject titles related to the subject, which was used to populate cells and then combined to find the relevant subject grouping. The results were further manually checked to confirm the accuracy. A pivot table was then used to tally the counts of each subject.

An example of the code can be seen in figure 3.8.3(b) which, shows the function for the mathematical sciences subject group column. The function in the column is as follows, ‘=IF(OR(COUNTIF(\$A3,"\*Math\*"), COUNTIF(\$A3,"\*Statistics\*")), "Mathematical sciences"'. It searches the participants subject title for any keywords related to the subject group and if the keyword matches the cell would be populated with “Mathematical sciences”. The keyword’s used are math\* and statistic\*, the asterisk signifies any words beginning with the word before the asterisk, to ensure that any different variations of math, such as maths and mathematics are found.

### 3.8.4 Present convergent results

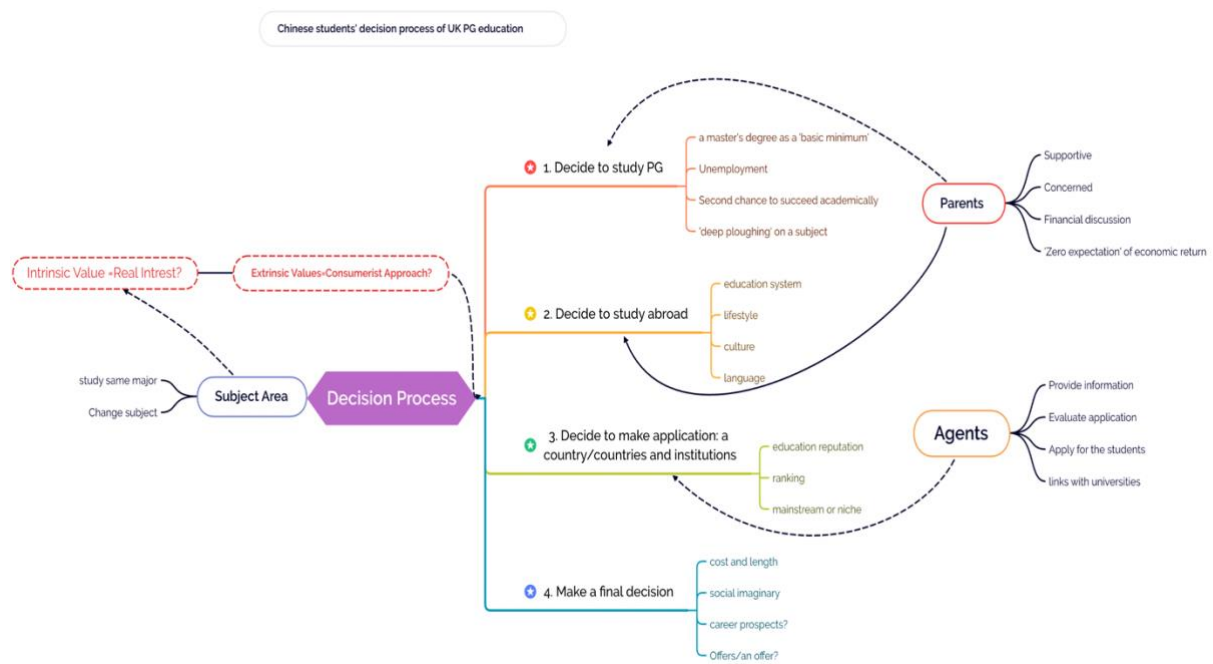


Figure 3.8.4 an initial mind map of convergent results

In the writing stage, a mind map was created before writing a section or a chapter. For example, 3.8.4 shows that the initial stage of writing up ‘Chinese students’ decision process of UK PG education’ for Chapter 4. The mind map has included key results from qualitative data analysis and quantitative data analysis. For example, ‘subject area’ was one of the key elements when discussing students’ motivation to study PG. The interview responses and survey analysis of participants’ subjects and subject change were combined to present the final finding (detail see section 4.2.1.1 ‘A chance to study a subject with real interest’). From the initial mapping out all the elements for one theme to the final version of Chapter 4 took about 6-7 drafts. The improvement of each draft was based on multiple revisits of both sets of data analysis results.

### **3.9 Research positionality and reflexivity**

Positionality “reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p71). It influences researchers’ initial research ideas and conducted methods, interpreted outcomes (Rowe, 2014). An individual’s positionality is underpinned by their ontological, epistemological assumptions with their beliefs and values, influenced by their ethnicity, gender, faith, social class, etc. (Sikes, 2004). Positionality is normally identified by locating the researcher in three areas: (1) the subject under investigation, (2) the research participants, and (3) the research context and process (Holmes, 2020). The author also suggests that positionality is informed and articulated by reflexivity. Reflexivity encourages researchers to be a research instrument (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) and immerse themselves in research data (Etherington, 2004). Instead of constraining researchers’ imagination, feelings and stories, reflexivity promotes creativity, innovation. It allows researchers to acknowledge the impacts of their values and beliefs on research design, execution, and outcome interpretation.

Malterud (2001, p.484) suggests that

Reflexivity starts by identifying preconceptions brought into the project by the researcher, representing previous personal and professional experiences, pre-study beliefs about how things are and what is to be investigated, motivation and qualifications for exploration of the field, and perspectives and theoretical foundations related to education and interests (p.484).

To reduce the influence of my positionality on the totality of the research process, it is important to incorporate reflexivity. I am aware of how my social and cultural background, international



study trajectories and life and work experience might shape the research design, the interpretations and even the whole research process starting from what kinds of literature I preferred to read and how I interpret others' work. In addition, as positionality is never fixed and is always situation and context-dependent (Holmes, 2020, p.2), I constantly identified and updated my positionality during the research process. I have tried to be sufficiently reflexive with open and honest disclosure of my positionality so that the reader can make a better-informed judgment for how 'truthful' the research data is (Holmes, 2020). In the meantime, I am cautious about the exposition of positionality that should not override the important content (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Therefore, I 'expose' three main aspects: my English higher education background, which inspires me to conduct the research; my ethnic and linguistic background, which led me to choose Chinese international students as the research participants; and finally, related personal life and working experiences to help readers understand the connection between researcher and researched.

### **I was a consumer to them, and I did not have the concept that I was the consumer**

I studied my undergraduate degree in a private university in China. I chose a private university because compared with other state universities I was able to go to, I found the private university provides a more multicultural environment. I still vividly remember the brochure I received from the school that claimed the university has the highest foreign teacher ratio in China and a substantial number of international students. Apart from the main 'selling point', it had a good reputation within my family's social network: 'graduates are more innovative and open-minded'. However, the tuition was fourfold of state institutions with a perception of a choice for 'rich kids who failed to go to prestigious universities'. English was widely used in the university and I was surrounded by peers who commonly discussed studying abroad as a 'second chance to succeed academically', it was quite natural for me to continue my education in other countries. Most students who intended to study abroad aimed to apply to a university in North America or Australia. Apart from institution rankings, they also considered the chance to stay after study. My initial motivation and imagination of studying in the UK were 'achieving a highly recognisable degree' and 'speaking perfect English'. Therefore, while other students were preparing for all qualifications for a future career, I spent most of my last year preparing for university application. At the time, 'DIY application' was not common, at least in my city and university. Students went to educational agents for advice and service. I consulted four educational companies which all started with a list of British universities based on their rankings. That was my first impression of how to choose an overseas institution. Therefore, I played the game by their rules and turned down any agents who told me that I would not apply to any 'top 20 UK universities'

at initial consultations. I went for an agent who offered me a plan with ‘three tiers of choices’ which were applying for one ‘top five universities’, three ‘top 20’ and one ‘top 50’. The ‘top 50’ was not my choice, but the agent insisted on having a minimum guarantee as ‘no offer no service fee’ policy.

I recall that my undergraduate university is a private institution established by a successful businessman. The premise of surviving is generating revenue through students’ tuition. The fourfold tuition I paid did get me a different higher education experience that I could not get in the public universities. However, why did I never position myself as a consumer to the university? The process of applying to a UK university through the education agent reveals a normal transaction that we will see in other business services. The ‘sales representative’ of UK universities negotiated the deal package and the price with me while I was trying to study my postgraduate course. I was a consumer to them, but was I a consumer to the university that I planned to go to? I did not think I was at that point. I did not associate the agent’s business with the universities then. By reflecting on the above experience, I consider the reason that I never considered once that I was the consumer of the undergraduate university and the university, I applied to in the UK was that anything related with education has always been something sacrosanct. The perception comes from the emphasis of the importance of education by my family. In addition, an individual’s educational performance in China is highly determined by the ‘test-central’ system. And a ‘teacher-led’ pedagogy underlies teaching and learning. The position of teacher has a much higher status in Confucian heritage cultures than in the West. Therefore, I consider a place/ an offer in any type of university as something I needed to work hard to get and must work even harder after I get the chance to learn and to get the degree. Even with private tutoring or paying an agent to apply to the university, hard work is still a necessity which easily obscured the fact that I was first a consumer in the fee-paying process.

### **Two different PG experiences and the value of money**

In 2010, I arrived at an Airbnb with two large suitcases in the UK to start the journey. I booked for three days to find myself an accommodation to live for 51 weeks. The culture shock hit me for the first few days, and I fully realised that I was on my own. The year seemed to go by soon as there was so much to study. The postgraduate taught programme at the business school contained ten modules plus a 10,000-word dissertation. The academic settings and requirements were all different and I struggled throughout the whole year. I recall the reasons were lack of sufficient language skills and unfamiliarity with the academic settings. Although I cried many times and thought about quitting, I survived from passing one module to another. As I spent most of my

time studying, I barely learned about the city, not to mention the internal mechanism of the higher education system and the rationales behind international education. We had 24 international finance students, one was a home student, and the rest were Chinese. Apart from making friends with people who studied on the same course, I also had good friendships with students from other Asian countries. When we were not happy with some of the modules, we did talk or complain about it. However, it remained moaning and none of us related the dissatisfaction to the tuition we paid or the need to have the opinion heard by any management team. In the end, I completed my degree with merit, and it was hard.

In 2018, I came back to the UK to study my second master's degree in education at the University of Sheffield. I did very well. Not only because I was familiar with the academic setting and requirements but also because my English was much better than the first time. With less effort made on the academic side, I did have more time to enjoy and explore the city and the culture. The positive experience not only fed into a good study flow but also led to the sense of worth coming back to study. The personal development was invaluable. As there was an 8-year gap between the two masters, I noticed many commonalities and differences. There were still many Chinese students in certain subjects. Career was still a common topic for every small talk I encountered with other students. I observed differences in increased fees, specific hours for lecturer contacts and dissertation guidance; students tended to be more stressed about 'wasted money' if they could not get something out of the course. Although there was no sign in the university saying that students are consumers, student's experience and satisfaction were much emphasised and central to the programme. Student representatives would collect everyone's feedback and comments on the courses, facilities and any affairs and present them to the committee formed by university managers and student representatives. All the new phenomena I observed got logical explanations after my course discussed neoliberal ideologies and marketisation of higher education. I was confused the first time I learned the concept of student-as-consumer. I was intrigued and did my master's dissertation about the subject. I am passionate about the subject and dedicated to research more about it.

### **Working in the private and public education sector**

I founded an English language learning centre for pupils and higher school students after graduating from the first PGT course. The main reason was that I felt the struggle to use English while I was studying in the UK even with over a decade's English learning. There must be better ways to teach students and there must be better ways for students to learn and truly use it.

Therefore, I offered a completely different system of learning English which was taught by native English teachers who had no experience in Chinese test-based English teaching. They were good at letting students learn in a natural setting and emphasising students expressing themselves. It was different from the traditional way of learning: remembering vocabulary or any content and testing students' competence based on paper examinations. However, it was not easy to persuade parents who held the 'customer is always right' attitude. Their focus was the English score in school as the score related to a better higher school place and a better university offer. The conversations between parents and us were often as follows:

My son achieved 67 in the English test before he came to learn English with you and now, he has achieved over 80 all the time. So I am very happy with your course! ...

Oh no teacher! What's happening! My daughter dropped her marks from 98 to 89. Can you offer my daughter some test skills training so she can perform well in school's English exams?

I often shared my experience of learning many years of English in school but not being able to use it in daily conversations. I tried to explain that the course we offered is compensation for students who study very hard for paper examinations but lack the chance to use English in life. It would be easy for me to get students to learn exams-based content to achieve very high scores. However, I would feel uncomfortable doing that. I considered it was morally wrong to alter an 'Enjoy Speaking English Centre' aiming for students using what they learn to communicate, to a 'test skills training centre'. In addition, I could not push my teachers to change their curriculum for any profit-led reason. Three years later, I let someone else take over the centre as I could not compensate for what the parents wanted, which was 'a quick fix of English'.

I then worked for a public university in an administrative role which helped to establish international exchange programmes and processed international students' applications and supported their study and life on the campus. Although the international students have to pay much more than the home students, I did not have any pressure to make them satisfied or associate them with consumers. I worked hard to support them as students. The university I worked for enjoyed sufficient funding from the government and had high autonomy. Students were not offered 'any entitlement to demand my service'. While I was working in the university, I never encountered the notion of students as consumers. Although I did not teach in the university, I was

addressed as teacher Sheng. I had a lot more respect from the students and parents. I had the sense that I might have had higher social status based on the fact that my family preferred me to work in the university as a 'teacher' instead of being a successful entrepreneur.

Reflecting these two experiences of working in different educational areas, I realise that being called 'teacher' means a different thing in the private and the public sector. In China, teaching is an occupation that enjoys high social status and respect from the public. When my colleagues and I worked at the language centre, the level of respect from students was the same as they showed to their teachers in school. However, parents as fee payers showed less respect and were more demanding to us than they are to teachers in the public schools. As the public schools have no need to worry about funding, teachers have great autonomy towards their teaching. However, the private teaching sector like my centre has financial concerns and the student's recruitment relies on students and parents' satisfaction. The parents understand the mechanism and see teachers in the private sector through different lenses. In the meantime, I found myself in two different positions while I worked in two sectors. When I worked in the centre, I was concerned with the satisfaction of students and parents. The business side was always at the back of my mind. I was under the pressure to offer what they wanted rather than what I wished to offer.

This section firstly reveals part of my higher education experience both in China and in the UK. The first-hand experience positions me as an insider toward the research project and participants. The research can benefit from the sharing understanding between participants and me. I can capture more nuance, deeper thoughts and experience of participants in the interview. The practical perspectives from my own HE experiences shaped the survey and interview design to be highly engageable and relatable to the participants. Meanwhile I am an outsider of their unique trajectory with non-duplicated personal and work experience. Secondly, my working experience within the educational sector: private versus public makes me a sceptic of the marketisation of education. Practically, it is hard to concentrate on teaching or being a teacher while having the business ideas clinging to the mind. Theoretically, a free-market logic has fundamental contradictions with the nature of education. Bearing with these initial beliefs in mind, I constantly remind myself not to let my own assumptions intervene the data analysis and interpretation. Driven by my initial struggle to understand the concept of student consumer and answer if I am a consumer of my university, I am very passionate about investigating other Chinese students' perspectives and experiences on the subject. Their answers not only will contribute new insights to the current discussion of the discourse, but also helps me to solve my puzzle.

### **3.10 Chapter summary**

This chapter describes and considers applied methodology in the research project. The mixed-method design with both quantitative and qualitative data purposes not just to enrich the research data but also to look for the convergence and divergence. The procedures of designing a concurrent mixed method and data collection preparation: the sample and the pilot study are discussed. The ethical consideration was considered. The thematic analysis is applied to analyse the data. The chapter also explains the trustworthiness of research by discussing my positionality and reflexivity.

## **Chapter 4 Chinese students' motivations and expectations**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents Chinese students' motivations and expectations, which influence their choices of postgraduate (PG) study when selecting a host country and an institution. The findings draw upon data analysis of the survey, with 848 responses and semi-structured interviews with 51 participants, firstly to address Chinese students' internal and external motivations for doing postgraduate study, studying abroad, and selecting a host country and a university; and secondly to answer what are Chinese students and their parents expecting from the study and experience?

The chapter will first reveal participants' motivations for postgraduate studies. The desire to learn a subject of interest and extending the joy of student life are two essential internal elements for students to continue postgraduate education. The determinants of studying abroad are then discussed to reflect Chinese graduates' strong desire to take their learning and life in a completely different place. The majority of participants believe seeing the world is positive for broadening their horizons, being independent and pursuing happiness, which are all incentives beyond academic and economic return. The insights into specific factors shaping students' choice of choosing Britain as the destination are provided: the duration of the master's programme, the charm of its culture and history, and the education reputation and university rankings. Chinese students and their parents' expectations are then discussed to highlight how PG study in the UK might not be as strategic as the majority of marketing recruitment literature emphasises, where expected returns are an enhancement of economic and social status. Finally, a summary concludes the chapter.

### **4.2 Motivations**

This section combines the results of the survey and interviews to present Chinese students' motivations during the process of decision making. There are three stages of the decision process: decide to study internationally or locally; select a host country and choose an institution (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). As this study focuses on the postgraduate level, which adds one more stage in the process, students make the first decision on studying postgraduate ahead of Mazzarol & Soutar's three stages. It is crucial to unravel the complex process of decision making, to learn students' internal and external incentives to further understand their perceptions of the benefits and values of their PG education in the UK.

## 4.2.1 Motivations for postgraduate study

There are two significant dimensions captured which answer why the participants decide on postgraduate study. According to the survey, 59% of respondents changed subject area<sup>7</sup> between undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG). The reasons that emerged from the interview analysis are, students' desire to have a second chance at studying a subject of interest and to extend the joy of student life. The two internal motivations rarely discussed in the extant literature related to Chinese international students. Maringe (2006) suggests that students' choice of university is largely determined with a consumerist approach, in which the intrinsic motives of interest and desire to study the subjects are no longer relevant. The findings from qualitative interviews indicate the love and interest for the subjects do partly motivate Chinese students to do a master's level study. It is also evident that students struggle with studying a subject for the sake of employability or simply without interest.

### 4.2.1.1 A chance to study a subject with real interest

59% of 848 respondents changed subject areas from undergraduate to postgraduate (see Figure 4.2.1.1a). Figure 4.2.1.1b further illustrates the changes within subject areas. There is a 1.2% increase in Business & Administrative Studies, the most popular subject area for Chinese students in both undergraduate (28.8%) and postgraduate (30%). The significant 17.1% increase in Education from undergraduate (only 3.9%) to postgraduate (21%), which in turn leads Education to become the second most popular subject area. The number of students changed to Social Studies also increased twice. The percentage of participants studying Language studies decreased by 12.4% from UG (14.6%) to PG (2.2%), in which 9% transferred to the education subject area. The number of students studying PG in Engineering and Technology, Biological Science and Physical Science halved. These changes reflect that a significant part of participants chose to study subject areas which are not commonly associated with high paying job prospects such as Education and Social Studies.

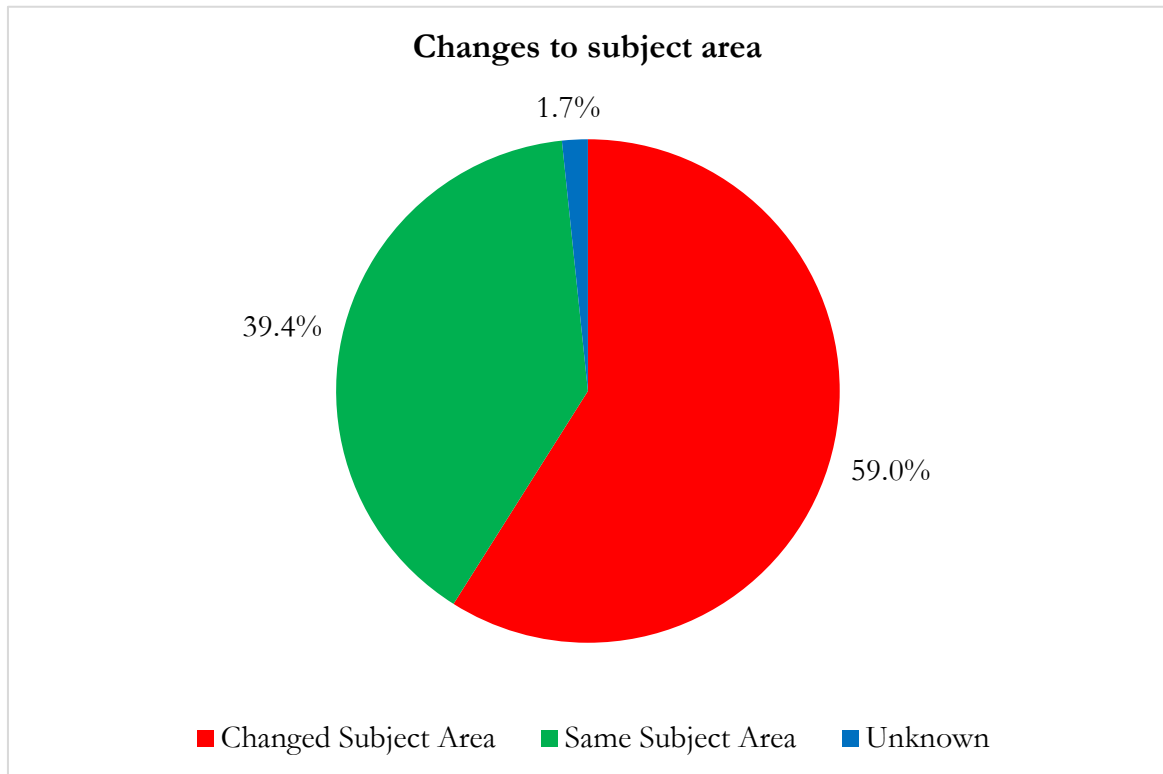
The interview analysis offers nuanced understanding on the subject and subject area change. All the interviews started with an open self-introduction of the interviewees' educational trajectories from high school to PG. Participants were free to emphasise what was important to them on their

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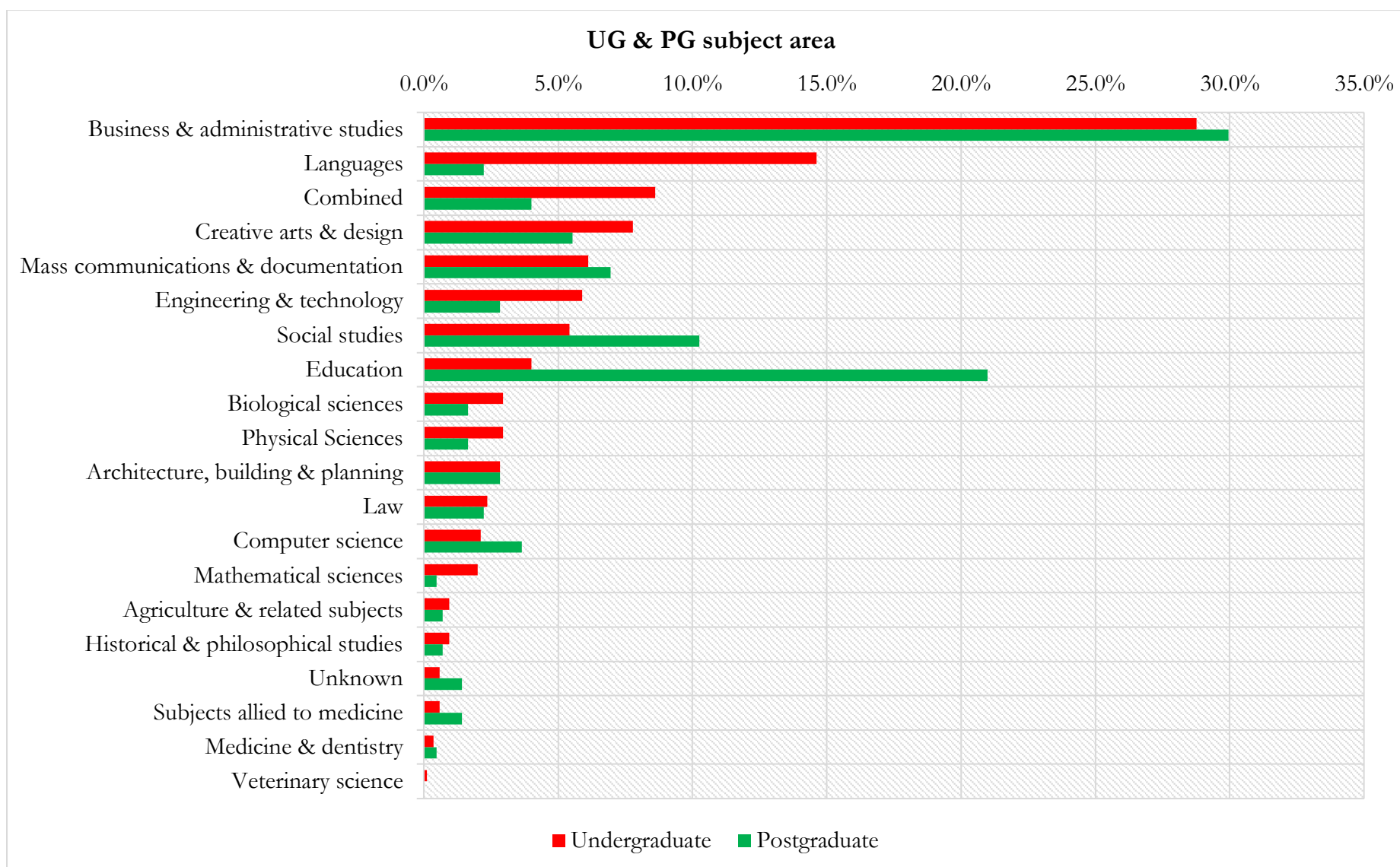
<sup>7</sup> Subject area refers to the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) 3.0. It is used by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs/jacs3-principal>



educational journeys. One striking topic which emerged is their experience of UG majors. Many participants decided on PG study because of their desire to change their majors to study something they were truly interested in. Although each participant has a unique decision-making process and experience, three common patterns are captured to reflect why they are keen to change subject areas.



*Figure 4.2.1.1a: the changes of subject areas from UG to PG*



*Figure 4.2.1.1b: specific changes among subject area*

### **Lack of knowledge about majors**

Interviewees (n=7) felt that a lack of knowledge about subject areas made it difficult for them to make the right choice for their UG. They spent the majority of their time in high school preparing for Gaokao (Chinese national college entrance exam), without exploring their interests and researching which subject they might want to study in the universities. However, after Gaokao, they were left with about three months to choose a major to study for four years (UG takes four years in China) in UG. Participants (n=7) expressed their confusion when they had to choose a major straight after completing secondary school. For example, Tian reflected on her choice and experience of her UG major, which are common amongst many participants.

It is a prevalent phenomenon that high school students lack knowledge and alternatives about universities and majors and make decisions based on not really knowing which major is right for them. When you start to study it at university, there is no sense of going back. It is unlikely that you will be able to change your major. You just carry on and study something you are not really interested in. I didn't do anything related to the subject anymore after I graduated. (Tian/F/Education)

Participants were then asked how they made sure they had enough knowledge for the PG major, especially changing to a different subject area. Having a gap year and discovering a real interest during UG are the common answers. Taking a year off between the completion of secondary school and the commencement of university is defined as a gap year, which is popular in western countries such as the UK and USA. A gap year refers to students doing various activities such as travel, work, and volunteering to achieve the presumed benefits such as self-development, self-reflection and better decision making (Heath, 2007). However, taking a gap year pre-university is not a common thing in China. Gaokao scores are only valid for entering the universities in the same year. If students decide to take a year off, they must retake the 13th Grade and retake Gaokao to be admitted by universities. In addition, the social pressure for a student not following the 'natural transition' from school to university makes the decision to take a year off even more impossible (Wu et al, 2015). Therefore, it is common that students rush to decide a major without any knowledge of it and practical experience in the two or three months before they start university. However, it is more acceptable and popular for young people to take a gap year or gap years after they have working experience and are more independent (Wu et al, 2015). Participants in this study also refer to gap years mostly as career gaps, which happen between completing UG and commencing PG, instead of pre-university gaps. The following participants claimed they benefited

from taking a gap year/gap years to figure out what they want to do in terms of career and study plans before PG study. For example, Ding made sure it was the right choice by taking a couple of gap years prior to postgraduate study.

The main thing is that I am interested in studying and researching is gender. I have always wanted to study abroad because I think there are many obstacles to exploring this area at home. However, I had a two-year gap before studying PG in the UK. It was good to accumulate other experiences and have the time to think about whether I wanted to study PG or just follow what everyone else was doing. (Ding/F/Sociology)

Apart from taking a gap year to figure out what they really wanted to do, Wu considered that the information of PG majors was more detailed compared with the source of information about UG, which was a great help for her to make a choice.

When I was choosing a major for UG, the information was not detailed enough for me to make a decision. You might have to consult schoolteachers who have more experience. However, when I chose the course and institution in the UK. I had information covering the reading list, course structure, lecturers, and programme director. I had a very clear mind about what I would have before I enrolled, and I did not have a knowledge gap or asymmetric information about the major. (Wu/F/Social studies)

### **Parental instrumental influence did not work/proved wrong**

Brighouse et al (2016) state that some parents place heavy pressure on their children's choice of occupation. A particular path would be pointed out when the children lack self-knowledge or lack knowledge of alternatives. Participants in the interviews frequently emphasised parental pressure or influence when choosing their undergraduate subjects. As a result, some had either no interest or completely hated the subject in their undergraduate studies, which deepened their determination to change subjects for their postgraduate studies. Qin, a female student who studied accounting and worked as an accountant for a year, embarked on a different subject: social media and management for PG. She shared her story as follows.

Although I did ok in my undergraduate studies, I really hated the major which was strongly urged to choose by my family, especially my mum. She studied accounting and worked as an accountant throughout her life. She considered it a stable and employable option for

girls, for me. ...However, I hate numbers and maths. I don't want to study and work in business anymore. I want to learn about social media. It was not easy to convince my mum, but I managed to come to study the subject I prefer and like. (Qin/F/Social studies)

It is common for parents to associate undergraduate degrees directly with job prospects. Therefore, some participants' parents have influenced their children's decisions based on employability and their perceptions of jobs regardless of what the children really want to study or their real interests.

At that time, my family wanted me to apply for a teacher training programme, but I did not want to study that. There was a clash when I filled in the 'zhiyuan' form (an application choice form for universities and majors). They thought it would be good for a girl to go to a teacher training school and become a teacher. But I wanted to study law myself, and they thought I was not suitable to become a lawyer, so there was that kind of conflict. (Qu/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Du, a female student majoring in Urban Planning for UG, had a similar experience but had to battle with her parents harder and longer.

I started choosing a major in senior high school. What I wanted to study my family didn't agree with, and what my family decided that I didn't agree with. Then we messed around with it for two or three months. We couldn't agree on one major. (Du/F/Humanities)

As Du's Gaokao score was not high enough to study what she wanted, she chose Urban Planning as a subject she and her parents could compromise on. Therefore, her desire to learn on a humanities-related subject did not stop while she studied at UG.

I started the 'changing subject war' with my parents from sophomore to my fifth year in university, and it was only later when they saw that I had some strength, that they compromised. If I had listened to them, I wouldn't have been able to study the major I wanted to study the most. They won't hold finances hostage. They still support me, but they tend to worry about how to get a job after I graduate with the major, I like and worry that it is hard to have a decent income with it. I am fine with doing what I like, and I don't care so much about making money because I am sure I won't make money with my interests. Anyone who continues with this major in PG must because they love it;

realistically, it is hard to get a job with payment matching some other mainstream majors.  
(Du/F/Humanities)

While these participants argued that their parents influenced them on their undergraduate subject choices, the influence was less apparent at the stage of making a subject choice for postgraduate. The potential reasons are students have more independence and more knowledge about their subjects than their parents. The insistence was also much stronger when participants were older. With undergraduate choice, there were only three months for them to make decisions, while for postgraduate, students had more time and experience to make a choice. In addition, applying for a different subject to a foreign university is normally out of parents' knowledge.

While Xiong's parents had the same worry about her career plan and prospects, she reacted the same way as Du, who insisted on choosing the Japanese language as her course. The difference is that Du studied with something she perceived as low employability, but Xiong did not relate what she studied to her future job.

I really didn't know what I was going to choose after I took the college entrance exam. My mother and the family all wanted me to choose a practical major that would be good for finding a job, like finance. I was not interested in that at all. I just wanted to study a language, and after looking at the scores, I could choose Japanese as my major, and it seemed to be ok. I didn't consider jobs at all at the time. (Xiong/ F/Education)

Kong, a female student who studied business-related subject then changed to education, had a different attitude from Xiong and Du. She changed subjects because she wanted to transfer her career path.

It's true that the undergraduate major was not something I had in mind. I wanted to study education at the time. I had great respect for education, and I felt that I had not yet reached that requirement and did not have the confidence to do well in this field. While I was self-doubting, my parents told me, "Go and study accounting. You will never lose your job". After four years of studying accounting, I realised I didn't like the subject. I didn't even want to touch it. So, I just wanted to build a gateway into another profession by doing this year (PG in the UK). (Kong/F/Education)

### **Discover the real interest in undergraduate**

Some participants discovered their real interest in undergraduate and decided to change to the subject for postgraduate. Two participants considered dropping out to change the direction but did not want to waste the money and time that had been spent on the subject. They preferred to stick with the programme to get the degree. However, the compromise pushes them further from continuing to study or work within the same subject area. Ni provides her story to illustrate her reluctance to study the subject in UG and her desire to change subject in PG regardless of parents' influence.

When I studied international finance, I found it wasn't the right major for me. I didn't like it. Only after my sophomore year did I gradually realise that what I liked was more on the musical side. I wanted to study music-related subjects, and at that time, I almost dropped out. I had already typed the letter and was ready to send it to my teacher, but when I thought I had already paid the tuition fee for two years. I felt a bit sorry that if I had stuck with it, I would have had a degree in finance, so I just put my head down and studied it. But from then on, I kept thinking I want to study music-related majors in postgraduate studies. So, I started to prepare for the graduate entry exam... I gave up the domestic exams for various reasons and decided not to think about them anymore.

My parents asked me why not go abroad and do postgraduate study? I responded, "in that case, I want to study a music-related major". My mum responded that "we won't support you. You have to continue to study finance because finance is more prosperous." I shout back "I can't survive from finance anymore, I hated it so much, but I really put up with it and survived through undergraduate. There is no chance that I will study finance again."  
(Ni/F/ Social studies)

Gu was transferred to a major that her Gaokao scores matched. Although she knew about the major and the career prospects. She did not have the interest for the course and found her real interest. After working with her interest subject and area for six years, she decided to study PG to deepen her knowledge and skills.

I wasn't very happy with my undergraduate school and that major. My college entry exam score was not high enough to match the major of journalism. I was transferred to Chinese Language and Literature, and most of my classmates came out of that major to work as an

editor, a journalist, and a language teacher. Some of them became writers, now writing books, poems, and so on. It is a great major, but I did not study hard as I had no interest. I found my real interest: taking pictures which I spent lots of time outside the university. I worked for six years as a photographer in different fashion and magazine companies. Now I come back to study my real interest systematically. (Gu/F/Creative Arts & Design)

Gu compared her UG and PG experience. She thought studying her interests did help her achieve better academic performance and changed her attitude of learning.

I spent my own money on a subject I am passionate about. It is no longer a compulsory education. I had the internal force of wanting to learn something, and I am more proactive in talking to my tutors... (Gu/F/Creative arts & design)

Gao shared his experience which echoes Gu's argument that studying a subject with interest positively correlates with academic performance and study ethics.

In my third year of university, I did an optional course in interpretation and translation. The feedback from my teachers and classmates made me confident that I am suitable for interpreting. I was probably one of those who didn't have much of a clear direction for my life planning. Therefore, when I receive the same, consistent feedback from people around me, I would consider the possibility of what they suggest. Then I tried it out and went out to do some part-time jobs and internships related to interpreting. I found that I could do it relatively well and enjoyed the process. Therefore, I decided to pursue a postgraduate degree in Languages. (Gao/M/Languages)

The explanation of these students offers a clear picture that a genuine interest towards their subject area is important. The painful experiences of studying a subject without interest either due to lack of knowledge of the subject or influence of parents prove that a significant part of students cannot be forced to study a subject because of the job prospects or other instrumental incentives. The quantitative data reveals the important factor that a substantial group of students changed subject areas from UG to PG and the qualitative data discovers further reasons why the changes have to happen, which is a key information often underrepresented.



#### 4.2.1.2 Extending the joyful study life

Undergraduate study life was described by 33 interviewees as joyful and relaxing, especially compared to the secondary school with intensive preparation for Gaokao. Wei provided her explanation in detail:

In my opinion and experience, the education before university feels like a ‘cage-like’ education. You are disciplined the whole time. Your teachers tell you what to do and what not to do. You will have lessons on weekends. Everyone has the same uniform to wear and the same hairstyle. Therefore, in my generation, entering university is more like achieving freedom. You don’t need to think about society and responsibilities. The closer we get to graduation, the more anxious we get because everyone starts to think about getting a job, studying abroad, or taking the PG entrance exam. I tried all three, and all options were available for me. However, continuing to do the PG was much more attractive than working. To be honest, I just enjoyed four years of freedom as an undergraduate and wasn’t keen to commit to society. (Wei/F/ Business & Administrative Studies)

In Wei’s case, study life is perceived better than committing to work and society, therefore, studying PG becomes a way to extend the joy and relaxation of the study life. She did her first master’s degree straightway after she completed her undergraduate. After six years working, she quit her job and did a second master’s. She had different reasons for studying the second master’s, which was about updating her thinking skills and studying something different that she was interested in. More importantly, she still held the strong belief that study was the best experience of her life.

The importance of education is emphasised at the policy level, and the Chinese government encourages society and family to prioritise education (Li & Xue, 2020). Therefore, students can easily have their parents financial support, even their parents have to sacrifice their own choices (this will be illustrated more in section 8.2.2.1). Without financial burden, in most cases, with sufficient funding to not just study PG but also enjoy their life in the UK, the study life is certainly a natural choice. For instance,

It seems to me I can take studying PG for granted when I have the interest, time and money, which were all three factors that were integral to my decision to do PG. I am lucky

that my family has sufficient financial ability to support me so that I don't need to commit to work or society too early. (Tong/F/ Business & Administrative Studies)

Tong provided an important point for the feasibility of extending youthful joy, which was the sufficient funding provided by her family. Similarly, nearly 90% of survey participants were supported by their family and 48 out of 51 interviewees expressed that they did not have financial pressures during their study in the UK, and none of the interviewees responded the need to repay the cost to their families. The tuition fees were paid up-front, and the cost of living was covered. Compared to students with the burden of loans and debt, these students had less urgent needs to commit to other social responsibilities.

Waters et al (2011) argue that British young people seek overseas education as a new possibility for fun and as a means to escape domestic pressures and expectations. Similarly, in Xiong's case, she hoped to continue to study PG and a PhD to maximise the joy of studying and escape from work and family duties.

I was not thinking about getting a job. I just went straight to graduate school. But I was under a lot of pressure as many classmates got jobs. So, I took an internship, attended many interviews, and finally got two very good offers. However, I really wanted to escape from work. Work and study are totally two different things. Work can be very difficult and makes people depressed. On top of that, I just want to avoid all the crazy human relations. To continue to study PG includes the mentality of not wanting to work and trying to prolong the joy of learning. (Xiong/F/Education)

Xiong was studying her PG when she was interviewed. She updated me a month ago that she accepted a PhD offer and has successfully extended her study life for another three more years. She also reported how hard her PG study life actually was and how dedicated she was to find a research topic she was interested in.

Although these narratives focused on students' reluctance to commit to work or other responsibilities, they did not choose to study purely for the sake of not working. Wei, Tong and Xiong did enjoy the learning and recognised the intrinsic value of their subjects. For them, study is more joyful than work and they prefer to be identified as students rather than future workers.

Chapter 5 will reflect more on these students' dedication to their studies and prioritise their learner's identity when conflicts of other identities occur.

## **4.2.2 Motivations for studying abroad**

As figure 4.2.2 illustrates, the top motivation to study abroad varied: 26.9% of students chose 'better job prospects' as top motivation to study abroad; 25.8% chose 'achieve different life experience'; and 19.5% of students ranked 'domestic PG entrance examinations are more difficult'. Compared with much literature arguing international students highly motivated to study abroad due to the better employment, the survey shows it is not the only main motivation. 'Achieve different life experience' was emphasised the most among interviewees. The following narratives and analysis provide more details to explain why achieving different life experiences is a key motive for Chinese students to study internationally.

### **4.2.2.1 Seeing the world**

Chao et al (2017) argue that Chinese students are keen to "gain a non-Chinese worldview and seek education with a worldview" (p. 258). Seeing the world is frequently cited as the main reason to study abroad for participants in this study. Wang studied a business-related subject for PG and languages for UG and graduated after nine years. Her initial motivation to study abroad was to see the world. She considered that her university (specialising in training teachers) did not provide her with a broad worldview. She also felt that most of her classmates came from very humble families with the same goal: becoming teachers, which limited the diversity. Studying abroad was her chance to make up for her regrets. Participants also perceive the benefits of seeing the world as broadening horizons and pursuing happiness, as illustrated by Shen and Ren:

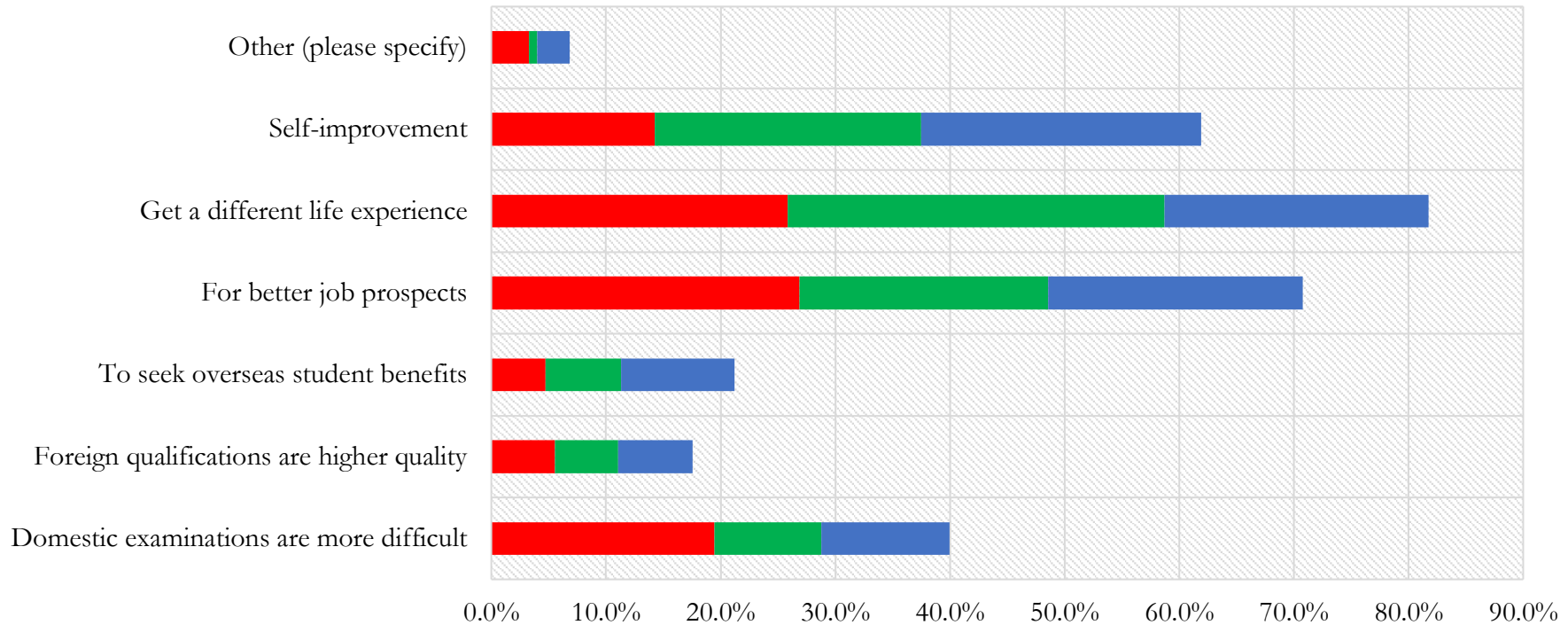
I want to go abroad to see the world and broaden my horizons. (Shen/M/ Business & Administrative Studies)

If I spent the same amount of money on a degree rather than a car, it wouldn't just be a degree. It will come with a study abroad experience, broadened horizons, and a more successful and exciting life experience. My primary motivation to study overseas is to add my own value by broadening my worldview and having a happy mindset. (Ren/F/ Subjects allied to medicine)

Ren believed that her money would be well spent as she would achieve a degree and the experience that comes with the study. She recognised the value of her study more than materials. She valued the cultural capital as more important than the economic capital. Hua (M/Agriculture & Related subjects/Social studies) and his mother perceived the experience of seeing the world as being independent in a different world without social connections and support. The life and study adjustment will make a person more resilient and self-reliant. However, participants emphasised that the experience should be different to the life they know. Participants crave for a different life experience with a different language, culture, and lifestyles. For Peng, when she was making the final decision between Hong Kong and the UK, she preferred not to go to Hong Kong because of the location's proximity to her home.

I considered Hong Kong, but it is too close to mainland China. There's no experience of studying abroad; having been to Hong Kong, it is pretty much the same as at home. I wanted to come out and have a different experience. (Peng/F/Subjects Allied to Medicine)

### What are your top three main reasons for choosing to study abroad?



	Domestic examinations are more difficult	Foreign qualifications are higher quality	To seek overseas student benefits	For better job prospects	Get a different life experience	Self-improvement	Other (please specify)
■ 1st Choice	19.5%	5.5%	4.7%	26.9%	25.8%	14.3%	3.3%
■ 2nd Choice	9.3%	5.5%	6.6%	21.7%	32.9%	23.2%	0.7%
■ 3rd Choice	11.2%	6.5%	9.9%	22.2%	23.0%	24.4%	2.8%

Figure 4.2.2: Top reasons to study abroad

#### 4.2.2.2 Domestic PG selection regime

Figure 4.2.2 shows that 19.5% of participants considered that one of the top reasons that they studied abroad was because the domestic PG entrance exam is too difficult. There were 20 interviewees who explained one of the reasons to study abroad is that the PG entrance exam (PGEE) in China is too hard. The strict selection criteria and admission policy have put many students off. Chu and Gao shared their experience of taking the exam and failed:

I took it once, but it did not work out. It was hard for me to get into majors with different directions. (Chu/M/Business & Administrative Studies)

The competition for the offer was fierce. Everyone was studying so hard. I was 1.7 points behind in the final exam. I didn't get an offer. I didn't want to go on to prepare for the exam for another year and retake it. 'Neijuan' (the involution) of the exam, PG was too brutal for me. I didn't want to fight again. The psychological burden would crush my confidence and interest in the subject. I thought forget about it. (Gao/M/Languages)

Both chose to study abroad to benefit from different entry requirements, so that their confidence and subject interest were protected. Qu's academic performance was outstanding in Gaokao, and she went to a top Chinese university. Therefore, I followed up to make sure if she really considered the difficulty of the PGEE to put her off studying in China. I asked what she was afraid of? She replied:

I didn't want to take maths, and if I wanted to get into a better university, I needed a higher maths score to get in. I couldn't beat others in the examinations who were good at math, so I chose to go abroad. (Qu/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Qu not only successfully avoid a highly competitive admission but was also freed from studying a subject she dislikes.

Apart from the exam being competitive, it is hard to change to a different major for PG. In the earlier section, 59% of survey participants successfully changed their subject areas from UG to PG in the UK HEIs, however, it would not be as easy in China due to the strict entry requirements. Postgraduate education in China focuses more on cultivating students ploughing deep in the same

subject. Ying and Ye shared their experiences to explain the difficulties and chance to change majors in Chinese universities.

I studied project management for my undergraduate. I had an internship in housing maintenance, which triggered my interest in studying historical building conversation. However, I couldn't take the PGEE as most domestic graduate programs requires an undergraduate degree in architecture and solid skills in sketching and artwork. (Ying/F/Architecture, building & planning)

I wanted to study abroad mainly because it is easier to change the subject and subject area. I don't need to queue for an offer. I consider that if you study art in China, it is not easy to change majors. The postgraduate exam set the limitations on your UG background, which I couldn't change from Chinese painting to illustration. (Ye/F/ Creative Arts & Design)

Both students provided details to illustrate the level of difficulty to change subjects from UG to PG in China, even their subjects were not drastically different. The illustration also reflects that students do care what they are going to study. It is not just about avoiding harsh domestic selection system but choosing a path that they can embark on the subjects they have genuine interests.

### **4.2.3 Motivations to study in the UK**

Figure 4.2.3 shows 848 participants' choices on their top three reasons for choosing the UK as the study destination. 31% of participants chose 'good value for money' as the top reason, 27.1% chose 'education prestige', and 20.9% decided to experience British culture. The interviews explain how Chinese students perceive good value for money and their desire to experience the culture and history. The education prestige and rankings are also the key facilitating factors.

#### **4.2.3.1 Programme length and the cost**

Figure 4.2.3.1 presents survey students' answers for choosing the necessary elements for a postgraduate taught programme to be good value for money. 57.2% of students considered the one-year length of study as the most important element. Participants from interviews commonly compare the programme length and the cost among countries like the UK, USA, Australia and Canada, and the region of Hong Kong. In the UK and Hong Kong, a master's degree takes a year to complete. Therefore, the cost is relatively lower compared with a two-year PG programme in

the other countries. Not only does a one-year programme reduce the cost, but also it positions some students in a 'better' position in terms of age.

#### **4.2.3.2 UK versus the USA, Australia, Canada...**

As students refer to university rankings, the top 100 universities predominantly are in the UK and USA. Therefore, the comparison between these two countries frequently emerged. Six participants stated that the USA is too expensive (Wang, Guan, Shen, Ding, Qu, Ye, Xia). Qu provided a typical answer:

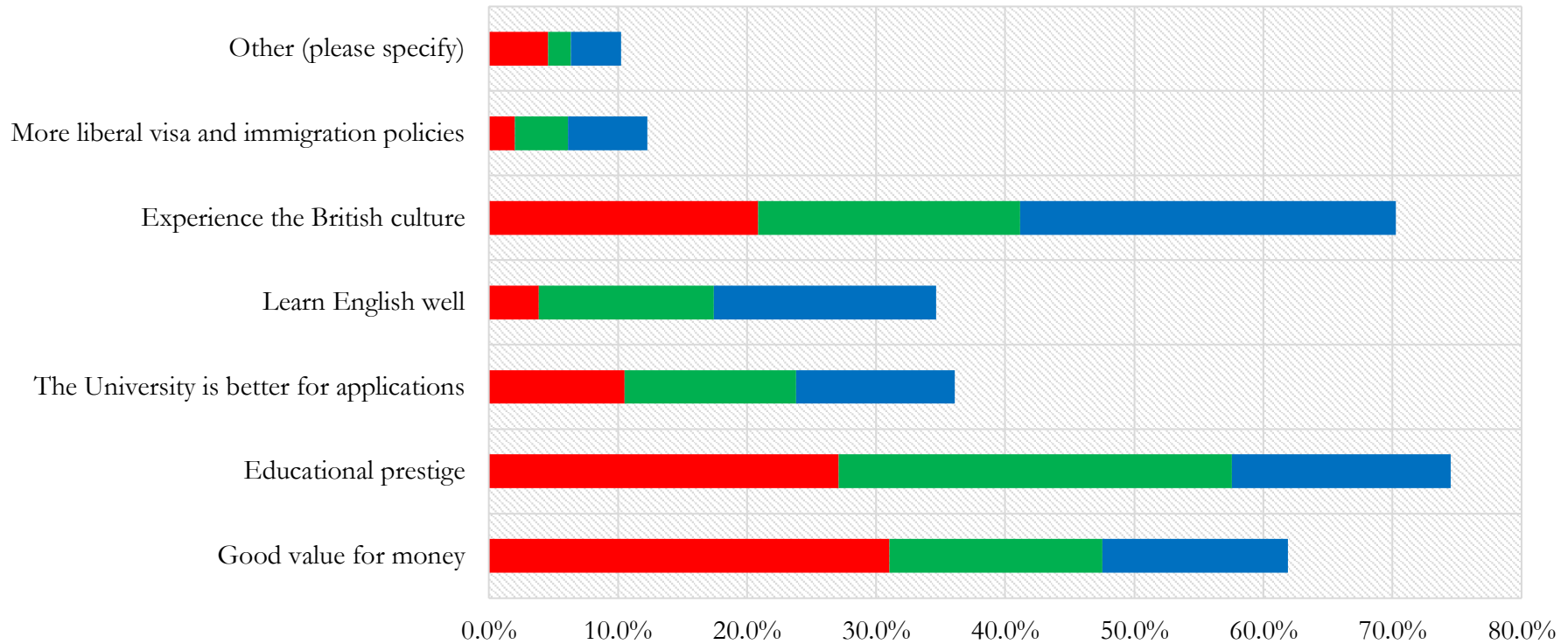
Most of the top 100 universities in the world are concentrated in the UK and the USA. A two-year master's programme in the US is about £100,000, which will cause financial concern for my family. I went straight to the PG, so there was no income. Considering the cost, the one-year system in the UK is more cost-effective. (Qu/F/ Business & Administrative Studies)

Two participants' parents perceived the USA as unsafe (Wan, Ye). In addition, Wan's mum considered the UK to have better education, and Ye came to the UK as it was a personal preference.

My mum considered Canada too cold, the USA too dangerous, and Australia lacks history. She said the UK was better and education was better. (Wan/F/ Business & Administrative Studies)



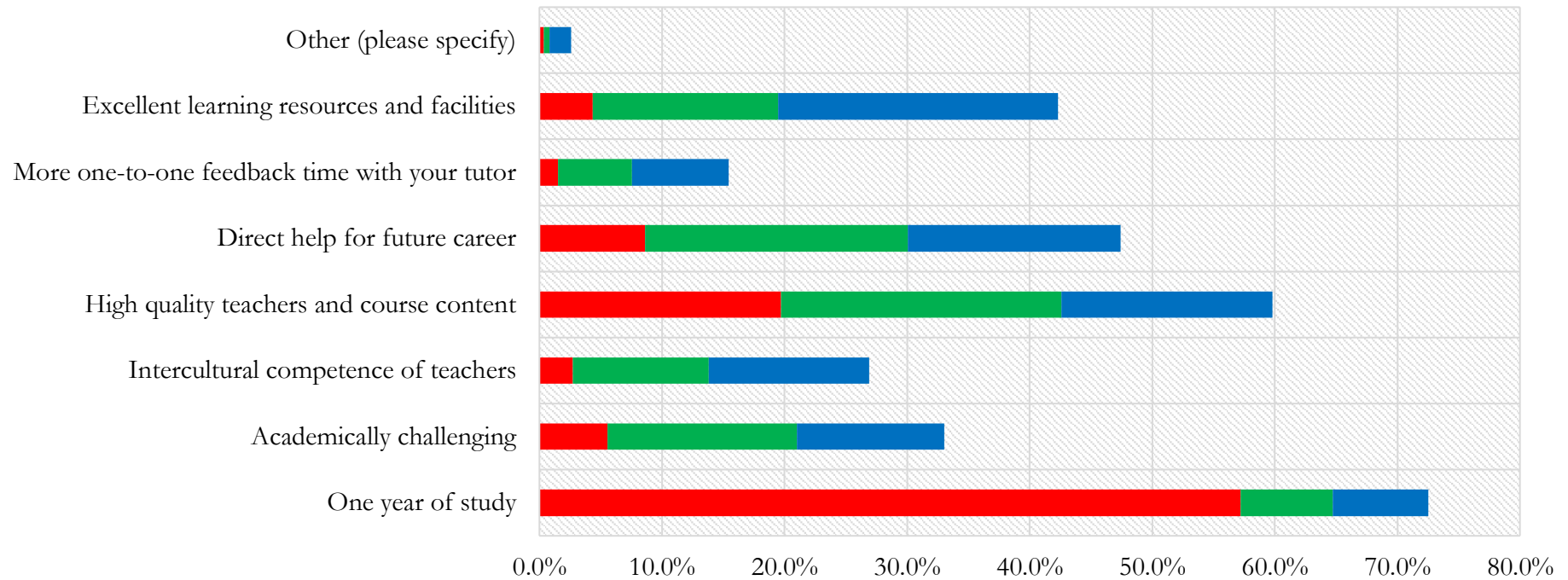
### What are your top three reasons for choosing the UK as a study destination?



	Good value for money	Educational prestige	The University is better for applications	Learn English well	Experience the British culture	More liberal visa and immigration policies	Other (please specify)
■ 1st Choice	31.0%	27.1%	10.5%	3.9%	20.9%	2.0%	4.6%
■ 2nd Choice	16.5%	30.4%	13.3%	13.6%	20.3%	4.1%	1.8%
■ 3rd Choice	14.4%	17.0%	12.3%	17.2%	29.1%	6.1%	3.9%

Figure 4.2.3: top reasons to study in the UK.

**Which three of the following elements do you think are necessary for a UK postgraduate course to be good value for money?**



	One year of study	Academically challenging	Intercultural competence of teachers	High quality teachers and course content	Direct help for future career	More one-to-one feedback time with your tutor	Excellent learning resources and facilities	Other (please specify)
■ 1st Choice	57.2%	5.5%	2.7%	19.7%	8.6%	1.5%	4.4%	0.4%
■ 2nd Choice	7.5%	15.4%	11.1%	22.9%	21.5%	6.0%	15.1%	0.5%
■ 3rd Choice	7.8%	12.0%	13.1%	17.2%	17.3%	7.9%	22.9%	1.8%

**Figure 4.2.3.1: elements giving good value for money.**

Some participants such as Yan (M/Physical Science) and Jin (M/Engineering & Technology) considered some countries to be the mainstream destinations, while others are unpopular for Chinese students and parents.

I understand there are many good universities in France, Netherlands and other European countries. However, their names are not well known by my relatives. I knew my dad would be proud if I went to a university with a big name that everyone knows about. It is a long story why he thinks like this, but it does affect how I make decisions. (Jin/M/ Engineering & Technology)

Figure 4.2.3.1 illustrates that the one-year PG programme becomes the most striking element of good value of money for students. Apart from the consideration of cost, another theme emerged, which is the age concern. In China, some jobs have age limitations, which causes mature students to be keen to look for shorter PG programmes to close the age gap. Furthermore, the social pressure of “certain ages achieve certain things” in China influences participants’ concerns about age. For example, a single person aged 30 plus is frequently asked when she or he is getting married. As a result, participants (Liang, Fu, Peng, Pan, Wan and Ye) expressed their concern about being older than their peers. As described by Peng, her worry about being two years older than other graduates represents the rest of the participants:

I went to school a year later than others, and then I studied in the medical school for five years, another year later than others. In China, PG will take two to three years to complete. However, it only takes one year in the UK, which will close my age gap with others. (Peng/F/Subjects Allied to Medicine)

#### **4.2.3.3 Culture and history**

The survey results show that experiencing British culture is the most important reason for 20.9% of participants and is one of the top 3 reasons for 70.3% of participants to choose the UK as a study destination (see figure 4.2.3). Culture and history are two crucial elements of attaining a different life experience and become the main driver behind students’ choices.

My main application was for the UK. I think it is my own personal preference, I have always been keen to study in the UK and experience it. The country is more attractive with a long history and its culture attracts me, so I only applied to the UK. (Cai/F/Combined)

I came to the UK to experience the environment. I am more open-minded and like multicultural environments to be honest. I also like English very much, so I had the thought of going abroad since when I was little, so I went to a Sino-foreign joint university with many international exchange programmes. It was great for cross-cultural communication and good to communicate with foreigners. (Bao/M/Social Studies)

Ying and Pan both studied in the area of Architecture, Building & Planning. They considered the UK, with a long history and its own heritage, will help them to understand and learn their subjects better. Ying provided her answer as follows.

I ruled out the US and Australia and choose between Canada and the UK. As Canada has a relatively short history, it was definitely better for me to study historic preservation in a country with a long history in Europe. Therefore, the UK was my first choice in Europe. (Ying/F/Architecture, building & planning)

The charm of certain cities and the British language make the UK attractive and exciting. Some participants visited the UK, and some had not been to the country before but set their minds to the country by watching British drama and movies.

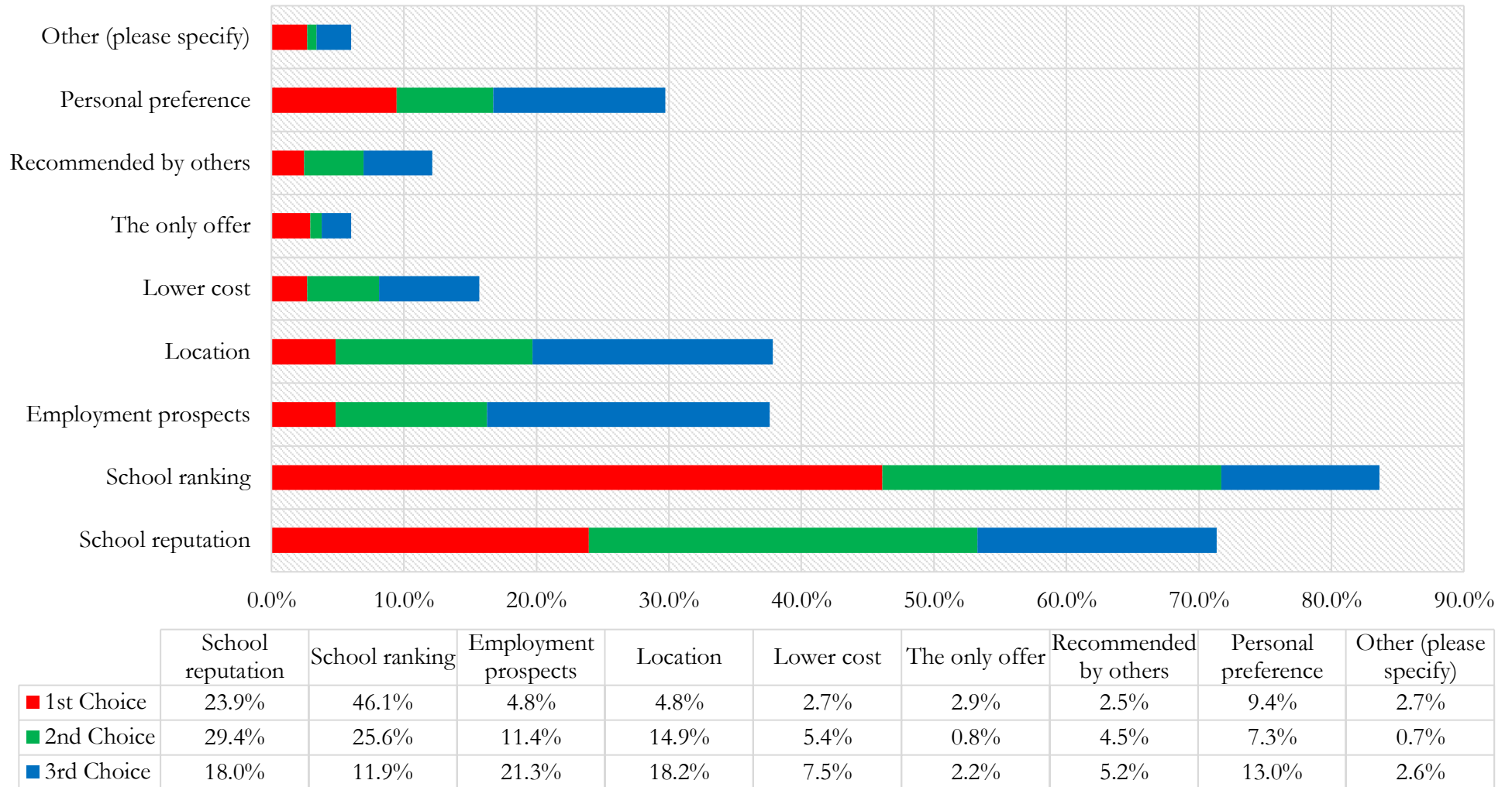
I am very fond of the city of Edinburgh. I visited it as a child. The architecture, the street music and the culture just appealed to me. (Liu/F/Education)

#### **4.2.3.4 Institutional ranking and reputation**

Figure 4.2.3.4 shows the results of the top three reasons why respondents chose to study at their institution of choice. 46.1% of them chose the institutional ranking as the top reason and 23.9% of students chose institutional reputation as the top reason. Over 83% of participants chose university ranking and over 71% of participants chose university reputation as their top 3 reasons to choose the UK as destination. Overall, ranking and reputation are the most important reasons why students choose their universities. Only 4.8% of students consider the employment prospects as the most important factor for them to decide the universities. The overall proportion of choosing university location as one of top 3 reasons was even slightly more than the employment prospects.

When participants reflect on their choice of UK and specific institution, rankings and educational prestige are striking topics. The university rankings are taken for granted for lots of Chinese students who use ranking to define a university as good or bad (Cebolla-Boado et al, 2018). Aligned with the quantitative result, university rankings were referred to frequently during interviews. However, some participants considered that the Chinese labour market prefers university rankings which increase the influence of ranking on their choice of universities. In addition, as most of the participants lived in China while applying to universities, they could not attend open days or visit the universities. The university rankings available are convenient for students as an information source.

**What are the top three reasons why you chose to study at this university in the UK?**



*Figure 4.2.3.4: top reasons to choose the institution.*

Wu and Xie both studied at the area of Social Science and explained the reasons why they need to refer to university rankings when they are making decisions. The labour market in China associates overseas students' academic performance with their institutions' ranking. In addition, cities and regions in China refer to university ranking systems when they make policies related to overseas students' benefits such as tax exemption for buying imported cars and transferring Hukou (registration with city or town) to big cities.

For Chinese citizens, Hukou status determines a wide range of social benefits and services: where they can receive healthcare, what kind of pension they're entitled to, their ability to receive loans, which public schools their children are allowed to attend, and more (Jaramillo, 2022). People in China are free to live and work wherever they prefer. However, without a Hukou in their chosen place, they will become the 'temporary floating population', which might cause issues and difficulties accessing certain public services. Therefore, having a Hukou in more economically developed cities such as Shanghai and Beijing means having more advanced public services and social benefits than other rural Hukou holders.

Many more economically developed cities published policies to relax the Hukou restrictions for overseas graduates to attract high-skilled and talented graduates. For example, in 2022, Shanghai Human Resources and Social Security Bureau issued the "Notice on Implementing Special Support Measures for Talents in Helping Resumption of Work and Production" to promote the resumption of work and production in Shanghai and give full credit to the positive role of talent work in serving economic and social development. The policy for international students to settle in Shanghai has been relaxed further. Graduates from the Top 50 world universities who have a job in Shanghai will automatically have the Shanghai Hukou. Graduates from the Top 51-100 universities who work in Shanghai and pay for social insurance for at least six months will be able to apply for the Hukou. (Only referring to the following university ranking systems: Times Higher Education, U.S. News & World Report, Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings and Shanghai Ranking). Compared with the previous scheme, overseas graduates have to work in a company with a registered Hukou sponsorship for at least a year and pay for specific social insurance monthly for at least six months to be entitled to transfer their Hukou to Shanghai.

The background information about the relationship between Chinese cosmopolitan cities Hukou and the ranking shows that students do benefit with a degree from a better ranking institution

when they go back to China. However, some participants 'blamed' these eternal factors for example, the expectation of labour market 'forced' them to consider the ranking. For instance,

I look at its (the university) ranking position simply because of the pressure of employment. Otherwise, that stuff doesn't matter at all. I am surrounded by people who don't understand rankings at all. When overseas universities came to my university to do the publicity of enrolment. The first thing they said was their ranking positions. It is difficult to judge the university from other angles when universities emphasise the ranking as the most criteria of what a good university is. When I came to the UK, I found out that the rankings are bull\* for the locals and home students don't put much value on it. (Xie/F/Creative Arts & Design)

While some participant just cannot get over the ranking position and will prefer the ones with higher positions over the ones without. Du expressed her strong desire and interest to study historical related subjects regardless of employability and economic return as discussed above. However, she couldn't resist making the final choice of a university based on the difference of ranking positions.

I applied to universities in Belgium and the UK because they both have the majors I want to study. However, I can't deny that the ranking of the universities in the UK was really tempting. There was no way to resist the temptation of this vanity (the university was ranked as one of the Top 10 universities in the world by QS). (Du/F/Historical & philosophical studies)

Chapter 2 has reviewed how university ranking systems were formed and the technical issues were commonly found, however, they still have significant influence on the society, the HE sectors and the students and parents. Here, both sets of data show that the institution's ranking has become a key indicator of how students choose their institutions. It represents value of money to students, and it reflect students' distinction in the labour market. While students argued that the external factors such as the labour market 'force' them to play the game, the significance of ranking as a motivation shows students' consumerist thinking during the decision-making process.



#### 4.2.3.5 'Easy' and flexible admission procedures

Compared to the Chinese PG recruitment policy, universities in the UK have much more lenient selection criteria and admissions practices for many participants. In Wang's case, she considered the admission easier than in other countries she tried to apply for.

The admission and enrolment requirements are not the same level as the Netherlands and the United States. Although universities of two countries were on the top of my list. they couldn't accept that I applied to management with a bachelor's degree in English. Therefore, I applied to universities in the UK. The process was easy, and there was no application cost. (Wang/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Yu, a female, studied Linguistics and English Teaching for PG. She now works for an education agent dealing with students' application documents. From her working experience, she considers that universities in the UK are relatively easier to apply to, as some programmes are set up for-profit.

I am judging from the cases I am working on now, I am writing application documents for other students, for example, personal statements, the student was studying accounting, and now she wants to apply for music management, which is theoretically possible, but the student can't provide any information at all about why she wants to study music management and her competence to study the major, but she can be easily admitted, because of these for-profit programmes in place, she can easily get in. (Yu/F/Linguistics and English teaching)

Lu, a female major in English Education for PG, she was an IELTS teacher in China. She considered the admission bar is relatively lower compared to the exacerbated international higher education market.

The money piles up for some students to constantly attend (IELTS) exams (cost about £250), Some had tried over ten times and more. However, it is unfair to students who are less privileged. (Lu/F/Language and Education)

Again, the external motivation like having easy access to the university and hiring educational agents and repeatedly attend the language exams reflect that some participants have strong consumer behaviour and mindset involved in their decision making.

### **4.3 Expectations**

This section presents the initial expectations from interviewees and their parents (perceived by interviewees) during the decision-making process. In general terms, participants and their parents did not express much about economic return or employment prospects. However, there are different expectations on the individual level. Some participants associated higher costs with higher expectations of the programme's quality. Other students expected to make the most of the year not just to study but to travel and experience a different lifestyle. As the duration of a PGT course is one year, some students expect more return on accumulation of personal and cultural capital rather than engaging in academic pursuit.

The majority of students were funded by their family, and parental influence was obvious on the UG choice. Therefore, interviewees were asked to provide their parents' expectations from their PG journey in the UK. The findings illustrate that the majority of parents prioritise the safety, health and happiness of their children. Parents' 'zero expectations' on financial payback or their children's future employment prospects were recognised as selfless love and, for some students, as a sacrifice. Therefore, the recognition was claimed as a force for participants to work harder and improve themselves. Finally, some participants' parents valued their children studying PG, living abroad independently or attending a prestigious institution as an end in itself rather than a mere means to an end.

#### **4.3.1 Students' expectations**

Tuition plays an important role in triggering different expectations. As figure 4.2.3.1 shows that high teaching quality and content is chose as the second most important element of good value of money for PG education, interviewees emphasised the expectation in interviews. For example, what Wang expected when she started the programme was having good quality teaching and learning experience but did not expect a high future return in terms of economic and job prospects.

The tuition is very high compared to the domestic PG programmes. I didn't expect the future return to be as high as the level of the tuition. I wanted a better course structure,

higher-quality teachers and better experience. I considered these were rational assumptions/expectations. (Wang/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Li expected the whole programme to be better than ones in China because of the considerable difference in tuition fees. In addition, she hoped that the master's programme should offer more in-depth knowledge and skills than undergraduate courses in China. However, she had a realistic attitude in terms of future returns.

The tuition definitely triggered certain expectations that it would be at least better than in China, but not exceptionally high. I did not expect a particularly high return in the future. At the end of the day, it is just a programme at the university. However, I expected the master's programme to be more in-depth and the study schedule abroad to be freer and more fragmented. (Li/F/Engineering & Technology)

For Gao, he expected to make the most of the year to travel around and 'live his best life.' His expectations are more on developing himself as a well-rounded person. He had no high expectations in terms of knowledge and learning or future career prospects.

I'm looking forward to going to all the countries in Europe that I want to go to. I don't expect to learn much this year, but I want to live my life and travel well. In this way, I can see how people live on the other side of the world, that is, to expand myself and learn different ways of thinking. You can say that you expect to learn a lot, but I don't think that's realistic. I certainly hope to take a degree home. However, in China, the labour market is very competitive and intense. The situation is tough to just rely on a degree to win a good job. (Gao/M/Education).

The background of Gao's expectation is that a one-year master's programme is controversial in China. There are many debates about the length of a master's degree. A common argument about master's taught programmes is students might not be able to learn as much as programmes of two or three years. Therefore, Gao internalised the perception and believed that he wouldn't be able to learn much within a year. Within the same context, the following participant, Jin also pointed out that he didn't expect to learn a lot. Jin was thinking of getting a better job with better pay. He didn't expect to learn a lot, but he believed that he could earn more because the things that he

learned outside of the classroom will increase his professional competitiveness. When asked what the things are out of classroom specifically, he answered:

A way of thinking and an ability to unpack a problem and deal with it with different thinking. Then there is the network, social resources, all sorts of general abilities that a job requires not just a degree. (Jin/M/Engineering & Technology)

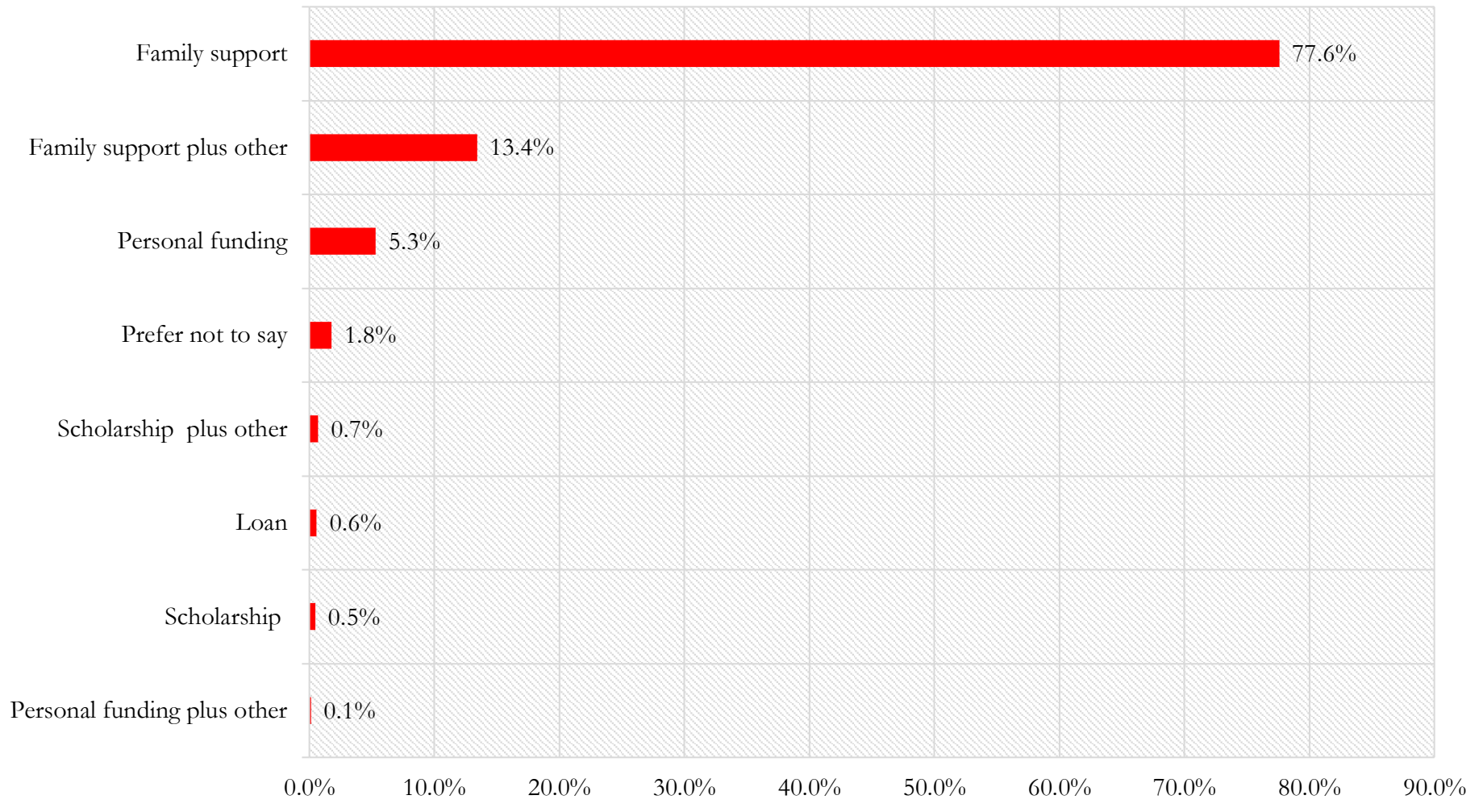
In contrast to Gao, Xiong expects to learn a lot and achieve good grades to continue to study for her PhD. She did not expect to fill the holidays with travels. However, as described in the section on study life extension, one of Xiong's motivations to study PG and continue to study a PhD is to escape work and adult responsibilities.

Actually, my goal is very clear, which is to continue to study for a doctorate degree. Therefore, I asked my tutor what kind of requirements a PhD needs at the start of my programme. ... Unlike other students, I don't want to travel or do other fancy things. (Xiong/F/Education)

Over a quarter of participants consider that it is fine without any future economic return. They perceived the experience itself worth any input. For example,

I don't really think about the return. It's like paying for the experience of studying and living here. It's a completely different style from home. So, it doesn't matter, it's not a big problem (without any paying back). (Ying, F/Architecture, Building & Planning)

**Which of the following options match the description of how you will finance your studies in the UK?**



*Figure 4.3.2: Funding source of survey participants*

### 4.3.2 The 'real' consumers' expectations

From figure 4.3.2, we can see 77.6% of survey respondents were fully funded by their family and another 10.1% of respondents' funding came from family plus other sources. In financial terms, students' parents and families are the direct consumers. What do they expect from the payment? And what do they expect from their children and their education in the UK? Ironically, while students above shared the stories of parental instrumental influence on their undergraduate subject choices due to employability concerns, most participants stated that there was zero expectation from parents regarding payback, job prospects and other economic returns. Parents only expected their children to have fun and come home safe and sound were commonly emphasised.

There was no pressure or expectations from my parents. Firstly, they asked me to be safe, secondly to be in a good frame of mind, then to experience more and then if I could take my degree back, that was a bonus. (Ying/F/Architecture, building & planning)

Qin was the one who needed to argue and persuade her mum to change the subject and not follow in her mum's footsteps of an accounting career. Although she thought that her mum hoped it would be easier to get a job, her mum did not ask for payback or any other expectations.

I don't have financial concerns or burdens. My parents paid 80% of the cost, and I paid the rest with my savings. They never require me to repay them. I don't think that they have any expectations. In fact, parents are more likely to let their children not to work too hard but simply have better job prospect in the future. Therefore, I would say maybe my mum hopes I can get a better job with the degree. But she didn't say that this time. (Qin/F/Social Studies)

The participants were asked about their parents' expectations based on their financial support and influence on undergraduate decision making, and if their parents' expectations are aligned with their own. There were 48 participants who felt that they didn't have pressure or expectations from their parents. 26 participants said that they worked harder because there are no expectations from their parents. They placed more pressure on themselves as they understood their parents' selfless love. For example:

I have an average family, middle class, maybe. We might not be able to afford to study abroad for three or four years, but one year is easy. My mum told me to have fun and go

home sound and safe. She never required me to achieve a certain level of degree. However, I put lots of pressure on myself as I knew I had spent lots of her money. Therefore, I passed all the exams, including IELTS, in one go. (Wang/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Three participants' parents considered what their children have achieved is good enough, so they didn't have any more expectations.

There were no expectations, I was the first one going to the university in my family, and it was good enough for me to do a master's degree. They are markedly supportive. They are very respectful of whatever decisions I make. They don't put much pressure on me, I talk to them when I'm under pressure, and they talk me through it. My stress mainly comes from the goals I set for myself. My goal was to achieve a distinction and continue to do a PhD. (Qu/F/ Business & Administrative Studies)

Ten participants placed pressure on themselves to achieve academic success so they could get a better job or continue their education without their parents expecting them to. However, Shen had a different perspective towards it:

My family supports me with the hope that I can live well and be healthy. In terms of expectations and requirements, there are none, even though I think that if you are capable, it doesn't matter what qualifications you have. The most important thing is this experience. (Shen/M/Business & Administrative Studies)

Du considered the importance of education itself enough for her parents. No matter what she wanted to study, her parents still supported her financially, even if they did not have faith in a bright future in her current subject. Similarly, Bao's parents think highly about education and reassure Bao that money should not be an issue stopping him from continuing to study.

My dad does have expectations for me, mainly my dad. He hopes that I can continue to study for my PhD. He means that I don't need to worry or care how much money is needed to spend on education. He hopes I can keep studying and work at the university. (Bao/M/Social Studies)

Most participants share one striking expectation from their parents, which is to be safe and healthy. Ni described that she had never left her parents and her home, it is hard for parents to let their children go abroad and be a long distance from them. They worry about their children in a place they do not know much about, not to mention without social networks or connections which normally help or support their children. In Wei's case, she studied for her second master's degree because she couldn't go too far from home to study for her first master's due to her parents' worries and concerns. Her parents were happy with her job offer from a bank when she graduated from the university. They did not expect or encourage her to study the first master's, not to mention the second one. They expect her to stay close by and be happy.

When I did my first master's degree, I applied to universities in Hong Kong and in the UK. Although I got offers from both, my parents were worried about me studying in the UK in my early twenties. I have relatives in Shenzhen, which is close to Hong Kong. Therefore, they asked me to stay in Hong Kong, so they don't need to worry about safety issues. (Wei/Business & Administrative Studies)

When asked about her parents' expectations of her PG and future economic return and job prospects, she explained that:

In terms of expectations or economic return, no, not at all. My parents will pay for what they can afford. They are happy that I can see the world or have a worldwide view. They certainly did not want me to stay away for sure. Still, in the meantime, they also wanted me to be as good as I wanted to be, so they thought it was good to learn and absorb from abroad. Therefore, I can become mind-opened with a critical way of thinking that will help me grow. Other than that, there was nothing in regard to finances. (Wei/Business & Administrative Studies)

Wei's last point emphasised that seeing the world and gaining personal growth are also valued highly by parents.

Some students were more sensitive towards the cost and more aware of the financial burden, Gao and Zong shared their parents' expectations in the context of the high cost.



I think for me, it (the cost) is a lot of money. It's a lot of money for my parents, and it's hard-earned. So, I am doing the best I can. For example, I worked part time...Because my parents didn't have degrees. I can say that they want their children to be educated. So, they just didn't say I had to get a good job or earn lots of money. They really wanted me to learn something, and I could change my fate by studying, and it wasn't that much of a stretch to say I could change my fate. So, it is about learning something and being a better version of myself. (Gao/M/Education)

My situation may be different from other students. How can I say this? It's similar to an undergraduate in that I am given the living cost monthly. (Implying that other students have all the funding in one go at the start of term, or no limitations on how much they get each month). Even the tuition still had to be put together and I had to borrow a loan. (Zong/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

She was also asked who would repay the debt and what her parents' expectations were after completing the PG. Here is her answer:

No, my parents didn't expect anything from me. We weren't always a very ordinary family that might expect children to have a return after graduation or something like that. We just... let's say that we had some changes in the business in the last two years. But my parents didn't expect any return, or that we should achieve something since we were young. They just said to me that they wanted me to see the world, just go out and see the world, whether the money is borrowed or raised, the world is there to see. (Zong/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Jin stated that his father was satisfied and proud of him going to a well-known university with a higher-ranking place. His father's expectation has been fulfilled in that Jin made him feel full of 'mianzi'. According to Zhou & Zhang, "mianzi, is other-oriented as a social self; it represents the public self-image, capability, dignity, and reputation as the salient components of its internal value-constructs" (2017, p. 152).

My father is one of those people who is obsessed with academic credentials. He grew up in a poor small place but changed his life through achieving a degree. He is a little bit obsessive about the ranking and big names of universities. I think it is about mianzi (face).

I got an offer from a very good university in France but none of my aunts and uncles know about it. It is not a good name for my father. The university I finally chose allows me to have double master's degrees and do exchange programmes in top world universities. These sorts of titles are so magical to my father, that they can keep him awake from laughing, you know. I went to a university full of all the elements that earned my dad a mianzi (face) in his social circle, which had exceeded his expectations. He is very happy and so proud! ...I am sad that my dad feels proud of these titles because I cannot imagine that he would feel the same pride if I chose to go to a university without all the 'flowery ingredients'. (Jin/M/Engineering & Technology)

Although Jin was upset about what his dad expected from his PG, he understood what his parents sacrificed for him and tried to meet their expectations, even though he did not agree with them.

However, they have sacrificed so much for me. The university I went to is so expensive, so expensive, even for the better-off middle-class families in this country. My family owns a small business, and we can just about afford it with a bit of a struggle. I was not planning to accept the offer, but my parents persuaded me to come. I felt so much pressure as they gave up a lot of choices belonging to them; holidays, decent house and car, just to make sure I can make my choice without any limitations. (Jin/M/Engineering & Technology)

The narratives above reflect that regardless of students' family background, education is prioritised. These students have the financial privilege to change the subject areas without worry about the economic return and enjoy a student life without other commitment and responsibilities. Their social and cultural background such as education-first and one child policy in China (further explanation please see section 8.3.2.1) provided answers to why their families are so willing to pay for their PG education even those not in a good financial position. Being the only child is common among students who were born in 1980s and 1990s, therefore, these students enjoy the financial and emotional focus from parents, and both sets of grandparents. Therefore, the expectation of going home safe and sound is reflected far more important than any other factors such as degrees and economic return.

#### **4.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter has developed a deeper understanding of Chinese students' motivations and expectations by analysing combined quantitative results and qualitative narratives. The motivations

are presented through the process of decision-making rather than following the traditional push-pull factors analysis. The choice-making process is complex and sometimes contradictory. Therefore, multiple intertwining factors and processes shape Chinese students' motivations and expectations. The chapter sheds light on some dimensions that are underrepresented. The first part of the motivation section reveals two internal factors: a desire to study a subject with interest and an active attitude of living in the present without worrying about the future by extending the youthful joy. The vivid struggle and battle with parents and discovering their real interests are all revealed as reasons why Chinese students want to have a second chance to study a subject that they are genuinely interested in during PG. The significant number of participants who changed subject areas between UG and PG indicates that taking a purely instrumental perspective (e.g., career return) is insufficient in providing students with a thorough motivation for PG study. Chinese students in this study were also motivated by non-career concerns such as culture, history and the human environment. Enjoying different life experiences and seeing the world are valued as an end goal rather than a means to an end. The joy of immersing oneself in a charming historical city or multicultural environment is beyond material gains. However, some participants are keen to accumulate the cultural capital that might translate into an advantage that will help them get ahead in life. The significant importance of the duration of the PG programme and the university ranking reveals a consumerist trait in students that is guided by instrumental decision making. This same trait is behind their choice to opt for a relaxed admissions procedure in comparison to the more challenging domestic entry requirements. However, students such as Qu and Gao considered it was an alternation to avoid to study subject they dislike and protect their interests from exam-oriented system.

In terms of the expectations, students are triggered by the tuition fees and expect more from PG, such as better quality of lectures and more in-depth knowledge. However, some students hold less faith in academic gain within a year but expect more in personal growth. While the majority of students are fully funded by their parents, they have insignificant expectations of economic or labour market returns from their parents. Students' safety and wellbeing are their parents' main concern. Seeing the world and having a better self also are highly prized by interviewees' parents.

## Chapter 5 Forming new learning identities

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the process of Chinese students forming new learning identities through reflecting on their commitment and approaches to their studies, as well as their opinions on the teaching practice and teacher-student relationships. According to the quantitative result from the survey, 46.1% of participants (n=848) preferred to identify as learners, and 34.4% chose to identify as international students. As most Chinese students position themselves as learners or students, to fully examine these two positions, qualitative study offers more nuanced interpretation and perceptions. Therefore, this chapter mainly draws on findings from the qualitative study to reflect students' in-depth interpretation of their identity formation within themselves and the situated context.

The chapter will begin by discussing the academic challenges Chinese students commonly face in UK HEIs and how students coped with a rough start with multiple challenges and how they negotiated the conflicts between their old and new learning identities. Students who overcome the difficulties form a new learner identity that aligns more with a western learning culture. The second major highlights the impacts of the relationship between teachers and students have on Chinese students' identity construction. The chapter will then illustrate how students perceive the potential identities given to them by their universities and teachers. Finally, a summary is provided to conclude the chapter.

### 5.2 A rough start

The postgraduate journey was not straightforward for most students. For 46 interview participants (n=51), the start of the process was uncomfortable as their learning beliefs and culture were shaken by British academic settings and norms. The self-realisation that the old learner identity may conflict with the new learning environment drove them to negotiate adapting strategies. A strong theme emerging from the qualitative data is that their start was full of setbacks and struggles.

#### 5.2.1 Studying with a second language

Language difficulties can lead to low self-esteem and fear of speaking in classes, which affects students' academic performance. In this study, 11 participants expressed that their biggest challenge was their language skills. For example, Peng and Jiang considered that the programme

was not difficult for them as they claimed most of the course content was covered in their undergraduate study. However, using English to study prevented them from in-depth learning as they spent significant time translating the content into Chinese in their minds to gain a better understanding.

Bai, Yu, Xia and Hua found that communication in English was challenging. While Bai felt too embarrassed to ask for clarification another time when she failed to grasp the meaning the first two times, Hua simply did not want to embarrass himself by sounding funny. Yu was frustrated and stuck to polite greetings with other students. Qin and Liu were highly cautious about conversations with their tutors and teachers as they did not want to cause any unintentional misunderstandings and counterproductive impacts. In the first meeting with her supervisor, Gu had an amazing story and creative ideas about filming and directing a project but failed to express them. Her frustration is illustrative:

I had a lot to say, I could talk for three days expressing my ideas in Chinese, but in English, I could only speak for about five seconds. I was so frustrated. My supervisor could see how shallow my mind was at the moment but could not see my six years industry experience. (Gu/F/Creative Arts & Design)

Other students (n=11) considered English language usage problematic but not as significant as the above participants. These students generally assumed they would be fine with their studies if they met the admission language requirement. However, the reality of using it in class defied this belief. For instance, Ye reflected:

At the time, I thought IELTS was enough to cope with my study as it was the language requirement when my school recruited me. However, when I came here, I was so anxious and continued to be anxious as I had no problem with the knowledge of my major, but using English caused me to understand only half of the class and in communication with my teachers. I could not fully comprehend all the information. (Ye/F/Creative Arts & Design)

Although there are moments of self-doubt, one thing these 11 students agreed on when asked about the potential solution for the struggle, was taking time to improve it by themselves. For example, Peng recognised that learning and using a second language takes a long time and great

effort, and Bai echoes this with “it (speaking in English) is something you really have to rely on yourself to improve”. They are all determined not to let language barriers get in the way of learning. Their positive attitude and approach to improving it signals a strong learning identity.

### **5.2.2 Becoming a ‘western learner’**

Jin (2012) argues that little overlap exists between Western and East Asian learning models as they reflect different thinking, attitudes, and approaches, which manifest in different learning processes. In this study, participants reflect that their learning culture shaped by their educational background caused them to struggle cognitively, emotionally, and psychologically when they received English education. The difficulties of trying to learn and think as a Western learner permeate into reading, writing, and communication.

Tian & Low (2012) argue that significant differences exist between English writing and Chinese writing, so Chinese students may not be well prepared for postgraduate writing in the UK, especially when writing is emphasised more in the UK than in China. In this study, 14 students observed that they must read, write and think within English academic norms to survive or thrive in their courses. Cai illustrated her perspectives in terms of the critical thinking, which is highly valued and emphasised in the UK:

There are different ways of doing research. I think being critical thinking in China is more a reflection of how you think as a student. You can't help it. Maybe what you say is right, but in fact, as a student, to criticise the work of your predecessors is a little bit frivolous. If we talk about it from this point of view, then I personally think that in China, maybe I can do this, but I prefer not to do such a thing, as far as I am not too willing to break the traditional mode of writing, to break the relationship between teachers and students, scholars, and you. (Cai/F/Combined)

Students like Cai, who might recognise the value of being critical in research, but she had to negotiate with the old learning identity, then adopted the identity of Western learner. She recalled that she reached at least 70% of western students' critical thinking ability in a year while studying in the UK classroom. However, when asked if she would apply the new skills when she went back to China to continue her Chinese postgraduate education. The answer was:

I appreciate the ability, which I might apply it to the life but not the academic setting. I have explained before that there are different ways of doing research. Chinese writing and thinking have their own merits. It will be hard to completely apply the western system without understanding the Chinese's learning culture in its own terms. (Cai/F/Combined)

Scanlon et al (2007) claim that 'drawing on knowledge of past learning contexts does not always assist students in negotiating new situated learner identities' (p.223). Ma illustrated in her experience that she felt she lost her academic capability at the start. Her previous knowledge and learning methods did not help her in the new academic setting. However, the process of forming a new learner identity began with reflection and practice.

At the start, I couldn't read the literature and make sense of it. I was so nervous and felt like a fool. With constant practice, I could read the literature and know how to write within English academic conventions. (Ma/F/Languages)

### **5.2.3 Adjustment to the new 'freedom'**

During the process of adapting to new academic requirements, students found themselves lost in a new form of freedom. Most students considered there was much less teaching and fewer lectures than in China. Only 2 out of 51 students considered they had more classes in the UK. Zong (F/Business & Administrative Studies) described a typical week as one or two lectures plus one or two seminars, which means they have lots of unstructured time. Many students were surprised by the schedule and felt lost when there was so much free time during workdays. Peng (F/Subjects Allied to Medicine) studied the same subject for both undergraduate and postgraduate. She noticed that the academic requirement for postgraduate level was more theoretical, which meant that she did not have the practical practice such as animal and physiological experiments. She was confused as she considered that her subject to require lots of practice or group work. Without these, she felt under a lot of pressure with the end-of-term exam. While Peng chose to maintain all the confusion and stress for herself, Gu and Ni decided to find out the mechanism behind the course setting.

When I came to England, I realised that we did not have any 'homework'. I felt so free especially with so few modules. However, I felt lost sometimes when there were days without lectures. Therefore, I searched for information on Xiao Hong Shu (a Chinese social media platform) and there were students who had similar experiences and found out that in the UK universities, you use your free time to explore and discover more on your

own about what you want to study and which direction you want to take. I realised that was the case when I got a confirmation from my tutor. It was more about my personal interest in the subject. (Gu/F/Creative Arts & Design)

I had four classes a week, no seminars, no assignments, no reading, so I didn't know what I was going to do with the rest of the week. I felt confused so I asked the head of the department and he said to me, 'read what you like.' (Ni/F/Social Studies)

Although students were confirmed and reassured that they could focus on whatever interested them, they still felt insecure whether their reading would be relevant to their assessments. A dilemma often occurs between being instrumental and following interests. Tong provided a more structured academic setting in China:

Students studying the same major have fixed classes, head teachers, counsellors, class representatives. Therefore, you will have a certain sense of belonging and know who to go to for support when help is needed. There might be homework after each class, extra-curricular activities, strict attendance, and other assessments on top of the mid-term and final examinations. (Tong/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

From Tong's understanding and description, students in Chinese institutions might have more sense of belonging and security thanks to the routine and structured setting. Transitioning from this setting to a less structured environment and being told to 'do what you want' leaves students feeling lost and confused.

In addition, some students struggled to see how the learning style matches with the assessment requirement. On the one hand, students enjoyed the freedom to learn what interested them. On the other hand, assessments were there waiting at the end of the module. Students here struggling with the 'conflict' assumed that they would be assessed on what they had been taught. Wu (2015) argues that Chinese assessment methods require students to 'reproduce what they had been taught in lectures' largely in the examination form of closed ended (p.761). Pan's dilemma illustrates the conflicting situation:

The most satisfying thing for me was the variety of books I read and the different perspectives I gained. What was also satisfying was that you could discuss all kinds of



possibilities with your teachers. However, my biggest worry was failing the course because I couldn't finish the reading list and meet the assessment criteria. (Pan/F/ Architecture, Building & Planning)

The satisfaction of a student who could spend her time absorbing knowledge and discussing different perspectives presented a strong learner identity with intrinsic interest. However, the worry of failing the assessments and not being able to get the degree could be interpreted as instrumental positioning. Nine students expressed the same conflict of their positions. They did have the desire for knowledge and deep learning but struggled to balance the effort needed to prepare for assignments and the freedom to study what they wanted, while being concerned with the risk of failing assessments.

#### **5.2.4 Intercultural engagements**

Yu & Moskal (2018) argue that intercultural engagements improve positive learning outcomes as everyone is a 'culture carrier' with different aspects, beliefs and trajectories. Although the value of a diversity in cultural environments is recognised, the authors highlight the potential challenges for students with relatively less experience with diversity-related activities or interactions. In this study, students (n=14) found cross-cultural communication and networking challenging, especially at the start of the journey. Three of them pointed out that intercultural engagements within group work were the only difficulty they found in academic learning. They reflected that the difficulties in adequately engaging in teamwork with diverse cultures and educational backgrounds were due to lack of practice and cultural shock. They considered group work as more time consuming, and they would have achieved better academic results without the conflicts among members due to different attitudes, approaches, and beliefs. However, they recognised the value of intercultural engagements and believed the experience would enhance their cultural understanding, which was evaluated more important than the grade.

Although the value of intercultural engagement was recognised, seven students considered it was hard to have meaningful intercultural contact because of the lack of diverse peers in their programmes. The pandemic lockdown worsened the situation due to limitations on social activities and in-person contact limitations. These students shared a common concern that the diversity limitation might cause them to lack understanding of the host country's culture and not achieve the cross-cultural competence they expected initially. Among these participants, Kong, Liu and Fang were doing the Teaching English as Second Language programme. Therefore, they worried

that they could not learn the authentic English teaching pedagogy and mechanisms with a high ratio of Chinese students in their classes (about 98%). The rest of the four participants also studied subjects with predominantly Chinese students. They expressed the frustration of not being able to engage in an intercultural environment and participate in diverse activities in the classes and on the campus. For example,

The academic pressure was fine, and I managed well. The most frustrating thing was that I am a thick-skinned, outgoing person, on top of that I did not have many English barriers. However, although I was in one of the largest institutions in the UK, the diversity in my class is minimal. I couldn't make any friendships or have meaningful interactions with local students. (Fu/F/Education)

On the contrary, there were six students who considered that they were in diverse cross-cultural settings, such as Cai (as the only Chinese student in her programme), Xia and Hua (as one of about 6% Chinese students). These students shared a similar pattern of progress and intercultural engagement. They felt under lots of pressure at the beginning within a diverse learning environment as they were less confident with unfamiliar topics requiring cross-cultural background and thinking. However, they gradually adapted and became more confident, eventually forming independent thinking, and contributing their unique perspectives to the discussion.

I was uncomfortable at first. I faced 94% of people coming from various countries and regions. Expressing ideas publicly in English was very uncomfortable. It was hard to get other students' perspectives without understanding the cultural background of their context. However, after a few weeks, I slowly adapted, slowly daring to speak up and express my views from my experience and sometimes, from a Chinese perspective, which I thought was a great asset to the team discussion. (Xia/M/Social Studies)

Beyond limiting themselves to rely on their peers, two students shared how they achieved more cultural understanding by observing and communicating with their teachers. Xiong paid close attention to every lecturer who taught her. She observed the language usage and interaction styles to get a nuanced understanding:

Last semester, I had three compulsory modules which were taught by three different lecturers. They all had very different styles. The ways they interacted with us, the teaching styles and the speaking including accents were all very different. (Xiong/F/Education)

Du shared her proactive interaction with teachers on her programme. She claimed that interactions helped her not only to gain more understanding of the local culture but also more confidence to step out of her comfort zone and take the initiative to socialise and engage with other peers from different countries and backgrounds:

The teachers were very nice and helpful. They constantly checked in if we were okay, and if we didn't understand anything, we were more than welcome to ask them. I did ask a lot of questions afterwards. My tutor shared his intercultural experiences with me which helped my communication with others. (Du/F/Humanities)

Through students' narratives and reflections on their experience of intercultural engagements within the campus and classrooms, many expressed worries and lacked confidence at the beginning. Although it was not easy, most did appreciate the chance to engage in a diverse environment. The desire for intercultural competence or simply the curiosity of knowledge and perspectives from others drove these students to participate or create a meaningful, diverse engagement. Once the fear is overcome, the sense of achievement and transformation make them confident and proactive learners.

### **5.3 Student-teacher relationship**

James et al (2015) argue that a learner identity is constructed within a social activity which is influenced by intertwined factors such as past learning experiences and academic staff. Teachers play a significant role in the learning communities and students' learning identity development. When discussing teacher-student relationships with the participants, there were lots of comparisons of teaching practice within two higher education systems. The distinctive differences between the two systems influence how they form relationships with their teachers. Han and Han (2019) state that teachers are regarded as knowledge distributors and as experts in their field and they historically have superior positions that granted them unconditional authority and respect from the students and the public. Parents and society have confidence that teachers can provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed (ibid). Wu (2015) examined Chinese international students' learning in the UK HEIs and found many students struggled with the

significant and unexpected shift of authority from teaching to individual's learning. In this study, 30% of the students who shared their experience echoed Han and Han's relationship hierarchy, and Wu's adjustment to student-oriented educational context.

### **5.3.1 Equality and respect make learning enjoyable**

The first major theme is that the equality and respect that teachers offered students made their learning more enjoyable in the UK. There were 17 interviewees who observed that the relationship between students and teachers differed from their previous education. They generally felt the respect is mutual in the UK. Compared to some unpleasant experiences at the undergraduate level, Chinese students appreciated the equal and even 'friend-like' relationship with their teachers in UK institutions. However, it took some time for students who had Chinese educational backgrounds to process the change. Ma said that:

I didn't understand that teachers and students are equal at the start of my course in the UK. (Ma/F/ Languages)

Apart from having a more equal relationship, students considered respect from their teachers to be the most valuable. They offered opinions and feedback when students needed help and did not reject students' ideas. Participants felt their opinions were largely respected regardless of right or wrong answers, which made their studies more relaxed and enjoyable. These were the typical reflections:

During the communication process, I didn't feel that the teacher-student relationship was very strict or that it was uncomfortable. I felt that we were more like friends, and they respected my ideas and gave their opinions. I think it was a very enjoyable learning process for me. (Zhou/F/Education)

Students' narratives reflect that they slowly grasped that they were not the learners who needed to show the "fearful respect" (Han & Han, 2019, p. 7) to their teachers. The new recognition empowered students to express their ideas openly and be more confident with their own knowledge. Within the context, some students transformed from being an active learner to an academic partner. For instance, Ying illustrated the point:

I had a strong feeling toward the concept of students as academic partners, that teaching, and learning should be mutually beneficial. As students from different cultural backgrounds come over and communicate with their teachers on the subject, the ideas shaped by different systems can be discussed and compared. For example, my teachers showed great interest in what the project process is like in China. What the benefits are and advantages they can draw on compared to the UK. I felt that I could bring new information to my teachers, and they could offer me new knowledge. I think that is the way teacher-student relationships should be. (Ying/F/Architecture, Building & Planning)

Ying was not the only one who recognised the value of mutual learning and teaching and had the confidence to be their teachers' academic partner. There were five interviewees who considered that there were zero academic challenges for them, and they felt confident in being identified as academic partners. However, compared with other students in the study, these students had no language barriers as two of them studied in English universities' branches in China and three of them majored in English language. They generally felt more acceptance and familiarity with the academic settings. Compared with the rest of the participants, these students did not sense any difficulties during the transition period and got more enjoyment from the learning process. When asked what elements made them feel they thrive at their programmes, they shared the common tips which were better understanding Eurocentric curriculums and Western learning culture and having good English skills.

### **5.3.2 Struggling to meet the expectations**

While students recognised and appreciated the mutual respect and equal student-teacher relationship, some students deeply struggled with the expectations behind the joyful rapport. The idea that teachers are not knowledge holders with sole responsibility to distribute their knowledge in classes and offer the correct answers shook some students' perceptions upside down. The first thing some students wondered was why there was so little teaching. The second major theme was that seeking right or wrong answers from their teachers felt natural to them.

#### **5.3.2.1 Why do teachers not teach?**

A majority of students (n=49) realised there were significantly fewer courses than in China. Students recalled their experiences in Chinese universities and considered that the teaching and learning were much more balanced, and they devoted themselves to lectures as much as self-learning. While in the UK, students had a few hours of class every week and a couple of modules

per term. Some students held high hopes for these few hours to offer them knowledge and guidance. However, they were wondering why their teachers do not teach. Near half of interview participants (n=24) mentioned that they did not have seminars in their previous education. Some interviewees (n=7) expressed that class is based on discussion rather than teaching, like the following comment:

The most uncomfortable thing for me was teachers here don't take the initiative to teach anything, they let the students take the lead and spend a lot of time on discussion and presentation. And what I don't understand is that most of the time the teachers don't do anything. Although I know the reason behind this, I personally can't accept that many teachers give the class to the students. The thing about students taking the initiative is that students need to have the same knowledge as teachers. The discussion might remain shallow if everyone just discusses very basic things. (Lu/F/Education)

These students shared the same frustration and wondered why their teachers did not take over the classes or had a second plan for "saving the class" (Liang/F/Education) after experiencing the many classes with bad atmosphere and knowing students could not produce quality content. Three interviewees expressed strong disappointment that their "famous teachers" with lots of publications have lots of knowledge and experience to share but chose to let students "ruin the classes" (Zong/F/Business & Administrative) or simply see "the boat (class) sink" (Xiong/F/Education). Moreover, students from STEM backgrounds believed that certain theory and content needed to be taught before it could be discussed by students. Deep learning requires a solid foundation of subject knowledge and practice in which teachers should play essential roles.

There is a saying that 'a disciple does not have to be inferior to the teacher, the teacher does not have to be wiser than the disciple'. However, in subjects like science and technology, some theories have remained the same for a hundred years. For example, things like the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics which certainly need explanations. This knowledge can be taught systematically and clearly by teachers. You can't design the class widely open for students to discuss when the foundation was not built yet. (Jiang/M/Engineering & Technology)

While students pandered why there was so much discussion, some students were deeply enjoying the discussions. A few students expressed positive feeling towards discussion-based classes. For instance,

I quite like the British teaching mode, especially the seminar session, where we follow a problem and discuss it slowly and deeply, and there is a feeling of not limiting human imagination, which is quite interesting. There is more communication with the seminar lecturer in a quite equal state, quite tolerant, everyone is very respectful of your opinion, and you can say whatever you want to say. (Wu/F/Social Studies)

### **5.3.2.2 I can't help but ask: 'is this the right answer?'**

While students enjoyed the equality with their teachers, many of them did perceive their teachers to know more than them. The authority triggered them to get confirmation and reassurance for their academic performance. Sixteen students considered that their feedback from their tutors or teachers was ambiguous. They understood that with examination-based assessment, teachers could easily offer right or wrong answers due to closed-ended questions. However, some of these students received feedback like “very interesting,” or “it makes sense,” which triggered confusion. Tian perceived the comments from her teachers as:

Here, you have a more equal relationship in terms of interactions and giving feedback. Teachers won't dismiss you too easily and praise your work. However, to be honest, the comments are on the superficial level with all very polite kinds of things. (Tian/F/Education)

Ye also struggled with her supervisor's praise:

I am in a conflict. I am thinking that I might not have adapted to the learning rhythm yet as the teachers keep agreeing with me and I am just a bit confused. I don't know what's right or wrong. It's a little bit contradictory to this thing, because it is true that they have been agreeing with me, but then because I feel that I am coming to learn something myself, maybe I just don't feel that they have given clear advice. (Ye/F/Creative Art & Design)

When asked Ye how right and wrong answers works within an art and design area, Ye said: “there are some standards about the subject. At least you have a process to distinguish whether the

workpiece is good or bad.” What she wanted to know was the process and standard to improve. When she brought up the desire to know if there are some standards, her teacher told her that she was her own teacher and they only provided her the platform. Expectations such as being the ‘teacher’ or partner sometimes led the students to compete within multi-learning identities. They are keen to have the best results by interpreting or finding out what their teachers’ expectations are. The old learning culture generally believes that dedication and hard work will outweigh ability. While students want to know the secret of crafting their skills to achieve the best result, teachers expect that students create their standards.

There are two statements in the survey related to how Chinese students perceive their teachers’ responsibilities, with which 848 participants were asked to agree or disagree.

“It is part of my professors’ job to make sure I pass my courses”. Only 13.9% (n=118) of students agreed with the statement, while 58.8% (n=499) of students disagree with the statement.

“My professors should round up my final course grade one or two points if I am close to the next level grade”. 34% (n=288) of students agreed with the statement and 43.2% (n=366) chose to disagree with it.

While students significantly disagreed with teachers’ responsibility of helping them pass their courses, a higher percentage of students would like to have the extra grades. The desire for good grades and higher classification of degrees are generally considered as important to Chinese students.

### **5.3.3 Benefits of close teacher-student relationships**

Students in this study appreciated the close teacher-student relationships, and felt they highly benefited from them. For example, five students found their research interests and built up the confidence to continue to do research due to their teachers’ encouragement and support. Four of them have embarked on their PhD journey. The other studied a second masters in the subject he found interesting. Although from their descriptions, they did not really have significantly more contact time with their teachers than other students, yet the positive influence of teachers’ recognition and care for students’ achievements were exceeded. These two students provided their examples:



I benefit a lot from my dissertation supervision. As my supervisor really spent time on my work and gave me guidance on a one-to-one basis, I wouldn't have achieved in-depth learning without that. (Zhou/F/Education)

I had a very small class with ten students, the interactions with teachers were very good. We all knew each other including the programme director. I had a very good relationship with them and when I got my PhD offer, I shared the news with them, and they were all happy for me. (Yan/M/Physical Science)

These students recognised their experiences were not representative as Yan considered the close relationship and interactions with most of his teachers a bit of luck as he was in a small class.

#### **5.4 'Tinning tomatoes' as 'assembly line workers'**

Xiao and Wilkins (2015) believe that lecturers' interest in students' academic performance, welfare and commitment to teaching are highly associated with students' motivation and commitment to their studies. Their research findings show students' satisfaction, and perceptions of teaching quality are positively related to lecturer commitment. In this study, some claimed that they were seen as 'products' or 'consumers' by their universities and teachers. 11 interviewees shared their poor learning experiences with teachers who made minimum efforts in teaching and tutoring. The following comments were typical:

There were teachers who were very dedicated, while other teachers who made a perfunctory effort using the same 10-year-old PowerPoint without updating facts on it. Reading through it and asking if there are any questions, and if not, class over. (Li/F/Technology and Engineering)

Students interpreted this type of teaching as careless attitudes. Apart from reading PowerPoint, playing recorded lectures during the class without facilitating the learning atmosphere and interacting with students was another common disappointment. Guan (F/Education) shared that "my teacher did not show up in the classroom and played a recorded lecture from last year". Liang (F/Education) had similar experience and felt that teachers who made students watch prior recorded content in the class generally identify students as 'products' and acted as 'assembly line workers' Apart from being upset, some students internalised teachers' attitudes, and were

discouraged from being active learners. Tian felt that her teachers' perfunctory attitude put her off from communicating or seeking help from them. As she previously experienced a one-year exchange programme at the undergraduate level, she made comparisons among class sizes and teachers' commitments:

Last year, I was in a class with ten students. Our teachers knew each one of us and got us engaged with the class when they needed to. They were really dedicated and responsible to us. My academic improvement was significant. However, this year you felt that your teachers didn't want you to bother them. I guess you can understand my Chinese politeness that I got the hint, and my mentality was more like "can't see myself thriving in this class anyway, but at least get the degree". I would pay for proofreading to make sure I don't have lots of English mistakes on my assignment, that's it. (Tian/F/Education)

Turning to external support or service is not uncommon for Chinese students, especially when they are in a class with 200 to 300 students. Their tutors were assigned to another 20 to 30 students, and the group meeting often replaced the one-on-one. Students such as Tian transitioned from being an active learner in a small-sized classroom with significant academic enhancements to taking an instrumental approach towards simply getting a degree when she was discouraged by the lack of support from her postgraduate teachers. Some students shared their anger on teachers without care and support for students. For example, Xu's tutor was assigned to over 30 students for dissertation supervision. She called her experience the worst she had ever had:

The most irresponsible thing was that I received feedback which summarised based on the whole group's work. I was like 'this has nothing to do with my topic. I want my individual feedback on my specific topic'. I was so speechless and asked my supervisor if he could send me detailed feedback based on my work, and he didn't reply. (Xu/F/Education)

Students like Xu were wondering why their universities recruit more students than they really have the capacity to support. They thought universities might open certain courses simply just for international students to generate profit and act like a factory. They had experienced casual employers who came in to do the only dissertation supervision and who were not reachable outside of their contract hours. Slowly they realised more that they were identified as consumers and the only meaning for them to be in the class was because of the tuition they paid. Lan commented and reflected on her understanding of the topic exasperatedly:

Teachers' motivation to achieve a good lecture is generally low. It is like they are repeating the process of making tins of tomatoes. You teach with minimum effort with this group of students and repeat it next year. Every year they have these Chinese students coming in to pay the tuition and help them generate the revenue. But where is the academic enhancement? They don't consider students' experience. I felt that is not what education is supposed to be. I feel it is an element of luck to meet teachers who really care with real interest in teaching and individual students. (F/Social Studies)

Compared to the last few themes that students reflected, their learning process centred as self-identification. Under this theme, students who considered they were identified as consumers or products by their teachers and universities were not happy. They claimed being identified by others within the learning community as consumers or products impacted their learner identity. Those with weak learner identities are not supported appropriately, and their lack the sense of belonging to a learning community may slowly transform them into to consumers who only care about how to get the degree with minimal efforts. Students who come with typical consumer and instrumental behaviours situated within the context of 'tinned tomatoes' may never be able to establish learner identity.

## **5.5 Chapter summary**

This chapter reveals the studied students' process of forming new learning identities. The start of transition is uncomfortable, frustrating and, in some cases, full of fears and tears, but the overall willingness and the recognition of the need to adapt are high. Most of the students start the process of learning how to become a Western learner, which may conflict with their old learning culture and require them to change study habits. The negotiation between old and new learning identities is not easy. The first challenge is using a second language to study, which demolishes some of their strengths and confidence. The new academic setting requires them to change their study behaviours and beliefs. This includes the conflict between choosing freedom or high grades and stepping out of their comfort zone to participate in intercultural engagement. Although the academic learning journey is not straightforward and the struggles are common, most participants report that they have achieved self-improvement by recognising the value of stepping out of their comfort zone, challenging some drawbacks of old learning cultures and recognising the merits of being independent learners in postgraduate education.

The teaching practice and teacher-student relationship are the second major perspective which situated students in the learning communities and based on how their teachers see them. For Bourdieu, “individuals are always positioned relative to others, but these positions vary at different times, in different places and are continuously adapted” (James et al, 2015, p. 7). Students are seen shifting their learning identities from enjoying the equality, respect, and freedom that an independent learner is entitled to, into a passive learner who struggles to lift up teachers’ expectations. Some wonder why teachers do not teach much and attempt to seek right answers. They hope their teachers and schools recognise the tough process and offer sufficient support. Thus, some students who have received the support benefit strongly from the close student-teacher relationship and eventually meet the requirements of the system, achieving not just a successful transition but significant personal and academic improvements too. These students are most satisfied when reflecting on their teaching and learning experiences. Some students on the other hand are not happy with some of their teachers who they consider only make perfunctory efforts and treat them as consumers or products. Within the context, students tend to feel more comfortable being instrumental towards their studies.

# Chapter 6 Chinese students' perceptions of the marketisation of UK HE and its impacts on their experience

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents Chinese students' understanding of the marketisation of UK higher education and the consumer culture around their postgraduate education. Chapter 2 reviewed the current literature and contended that market forces have reconfigured the HEIs in the UK. Most discussion is centred around government policy and is voiced from the academic level, the impact of marketisation on students' learning and daily life remain largely unknown (Brooks et al, 2021a). Therefore, this chapter draws on the qualitative data findings based on the interviews to explore the perspectives of a group of students (n=51) who are on the frontline of the market mechanisms and practices executed. Investigating what the marketisation of UK higher education means to them and how they perceive the impacts further reveals their relationship with HEIs and their identity construction within the context of marketisation.

The chapter starts with presenting students' general understanding of the phenomenon of marketisation, followed by four main characteristics that students associate with their postgraduate studies with market-led approaches: an industry chain, tuition fees, 'easy in and easy out', and university ranking. The chapter then continues with three major attitudes students hold towards marketisation, corresponding to the pros and cons they perceived. Finally, the concluding statement is presented.

## 6.2 The general understanding

When 51 interviewees were asked if they had ever heard of the marketisation of higher education or experienced the phenomenon, 45 expressed various definitions and shared their observations and experience. Six had not heard about it or associated any experience with it before they arrived in the UK, and three of them said they started to have some understanding through their experience in the UK.

Although different perspectives and experiences were shared, a consensus of what the marketisation of UK HE means to them is that the UK government and/or universities treat higher education as an industry and are recruiting international students to generate revenues. On

the one hand, five considered the UK government was the one desperate to market its higher education sector as an export industry to support economic growth. Typical comments include “The UK has nothing to sell but education” (Bai/F/Creative arts and Design) and “the government treats its universities as cash cows” (Gao/M/Languages). On the other hand, six students believed universities are those that use postgraduate education as a means to make money. The majority of participants (n=34) did not separate the government and universities and offered a common understanding illustrated by Tong and Peng:

Most international students are self-funded, and the government and universities are working on expanding enrolment, lowering conditions and simplifying the visa process. These are signs of marketisation. (Tong/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

My university recruits lots and lots of Chinese students. I was under the impression that international students are a way of making money for the government and the universities. It is an era where, regardless of how bad these universities are, there are still a lot of students coming every year, and it is a growing phenomenon. The demand keeps the market going. (Peng/F/Subjects Allied to Medicine)

### **6.3 Four main characteristics**

Further to general understanding of the marketisation, more nuanced interpretations were offered and there are four main characteristics of the marketisation of UK HE which emerged from participants’ experience and observation.

#### **6.3.1 The international student industry**

The first main characteristic of marketisation students consider is an industry chain servicing the “international student economy” (Guan/F/Education). The chain covers the whole student journey in the UK HEIs, including educational agents, accommodation providers/agents, transport and travel agents, educational consultancy, and so on. Students understand these services are fully commercialised with one-off contracts, which triggers them to think there is a market centred on their education in the UK and that they are the customers to be pleased.

### 6.3.1.1 The major players: educational agents

Educational agents are the major players in the industry chain, as significant students relied heavily on consulting them (Cao & Tran, 2015; Yang et al, 2022). All participants in the interviews (n=51) are aware of educational agents providing application services in China. The existence of agents has been taken for granted. From the participant's experience, the range of service fees charged by the agents is from £1,500 to £4,000 per case depending on brands and various services. The service typically helps decisions on university choices, preparing the paperwork, and dealing with the actual university application. Some students might pay extra for visa applications. As education lacks the face value of conventional products (Ng & Forbes, 2009), agents use university rankings as the face value by which to sell the contracts. According to students in this study, the league tables are equivalent to the "shop brochures" (Tong/F/Business & Administrative Studies) used in the initial consultation. It is quick and easy to present to students what kind of offers from which classification of universities they can help with. At the initial consultation, most agents proposed a list of choices, including some universities with strong ranking positions and some with weaker ranking positions as guaranteed universities for students to make decisions.

Among all the interview participants(n=51), 26 used agents and had an unsatisfactory experience, and 16 of them ended up applying by themselves in the end. Around a quarter of students (n=12) were satisfied with their agents and service. The rest (n=13) chose to make the application by themselves. The majority of students (n=39) students do not recommend using agents for three main reasons. Firstly, the application process is considered essential to understanding the course and learning if it is the right choice, as in this example:

I did it myself. I felt students should really look up information on their own. The application process is an important part of understanding the course. I have a strong aversion to agents. (Wang/F/Business Administrative Studies)

Secondly, after experiencing the application, most applicants considered the process easy and less intimidating than expected, which deepened their belief that prospective applicants would be capable of applying by themselves. Yu was sceptical about the agents initially, but students around her used agents, which made her insecure about her DIY approach. She shared her experience:

I used an agent because I was not confident to do it myself. However, once I signed the contract, they just dragged the process ... Some random universities were added to my list

of choices. I refused to have them, and it ended badly. After I took it over, I received a good offer. I found out that the information the agents were selling was easily accessible. It was beneficial to do it by myself. (Yu/F/Education)

Thirdly, there was a strong impression that the standards of agents vary, so some students had a poorer service than others. The main complaint was that the agents did not accurately prepare their paperwork. For example:

I went through an agent when I applied to universities, but there was a big problem with the paperwork. All the universities rejected my applications. In the end, I had to do it myself by revising the documents and applying. The offer came quickly. (Kong/F/Education)

Students who were satisfied with the agents considered their needs were met. However, five students were working while the process was going on. They were not really involved much with the applications. Lin illustrated his experience with an agent in which he claimed he was satisfied with the service but regretted the major when he completed the course.

It was good because my degree was 2.2, but the agent managed to apply to a university that required 2.1. However, I regretted that the major did not really match what I wanted. (Lin/M/Business & Administrative Studies)

All participants considered the education agent a by-product of marketisation. They were very sceptical about the quality of the agents and did not trust or respect the agents as much as they did the universities. Students tended not to associate UK universities with the agents. Jin was shocked and disappointed when he learned that universities must pay commissions to the agents.

I was heartbroken to know that my university had to pay the commission to the agents. Are the students not good enough to come to university or are the universities not good enough to recruit students? (Jin/M/Engineering and Technology)

Aligning with the idea that universities should not work with agents, Jiang (M/Engineering and Technology) proposed that universities should provide support and guidance on overseas students' applications. However, the different admission systems and requirements intimidate students, and



the agents try to sell asymmetrical information. In addition, Wu (F/Social Studies) and Xia (M/Social studies) were proud and liked the idea that their universities or departments did not work with agents. While most students did not associate their bad experiences with HEIs in the UK, Sun considered the agents to be the sales representatives for UK universities.

The way universities work with agents is equal to companies and sales representatives. The agent earns a commission fee from the university when recruiting students. In addition, universities use agents to help to hit the target international student numbers they need each year. (Sun/F/Languages)

While Sun illustrated universities and the agents both play an important role in steering the marketisation, students like Tong recognised the service she demanded from the agent accelerated the marketisation of higher education too.

When I applied for graduate school, I paid a consultancy company to match the most suitable school within my condition to achieve the best-expected result (e.g., for a better-ranking university), which in fact, has made higher education marketised. (Tong/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

#### **6.3.1.2 Other service providers**

Apart from the educational agents earning commission from institutions and students discussed above, students are offered other services along their studies in the UK. These commercial services stimulate a consumerist culture around UK international higher education. All the service providers are keen to have a slice of market share. Wang illustrated:

One characteristic of the marketisation of UK universities is that students who come to study are at least 22 years old, but they are offered all sorts of services along the way. Examples include application agents, language test training, visa application, pickups from the airport, and accommodation agents. Even immoral services such as ghost-writing, attendance on behalf of others etc., exist to buy. It really does make people think that as long as you spend money, you can get it all done. (Wang/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

According to Wang, students have the chance to be active consumers and passive learners who pay to get everything done. All the students knew about existence of immoral services such as ghost-writing and attendance replacement as the advertisements of these services are often spread within their social media groups and emails. Other services that students considered located in a grey area are making complaints on grades and degrees on behalf of students. Qu illustrated:

I've seen a lot of agents on the internet who promote helping students with their complaints if they fail subjects, so I think it's probably an industry around. (Female, Business & Administrative Studies)

The industry chain centred around international students, here, specifically Chinese students, which presents a clear reality of marketisation in practice. The marketisation stems from the UK government and universities objectifying international students as a source of income, which spans to a whole industry chain dedicated to generating income from Chinese students. These services include educational agents and other services that lack of regulations and standards. The high ratio of dissatisfaction on the agents did not result in any penalties and the immoral services that students reported still exist.

To further illustrate what students described about the industry chain and the services they mentioned, I attached the advertisements I received in my university mailbox and social media account: Wetchat as Appendix H). The first one is a screenshot of my Spam emails which contains five emails that these service providers send to me between 16 June 2023 to 12 July 2023. As I have not opened any of them but reading from the subject and senders' names. They were all about services such as university application, essay tutoring and ghosting writing etc. The second picture is a screenshot of a message from a Wetchat (similar with Whatsapp) group I joined in for second-hand products information for international students in Sheffield while I studied PG there. The message sender addressed himself/herself as 'degree issue adds 937759419', which means that anyone who cannot graduate normally, or thinking drop off, or fail modules etc can add the number and will be serviced with authentic certificate and transcript, medical treatment proof and certificate etc. The message would be seen by 473 group members.

### **6.3.2 Tuition fees**

Based on students' understanding, tuition fees are another characteristic of marketisation. Three features of postgraduate tuition fees are observed and considered as commercial behaviours.

### 6.3.2.1 Expensive

Chapter 4 revealed that about 88% of students (n=848) in the survey are supported by family funding. Among the interviewees, 48 out of 51 did not consider the cost a burden for themselves and their families. However, most interviewees (n=40) considered their tuition fees for postgraduate education expensive, especially compared with the domestic tuition fees. For example, Luo paid around £32,000 for his master's programme in the UK and £1,000 per year for his undergraduate in China. He considered his tuition fee was 'outrageous' but still not the highest compared with other universities.

The UK politicians have developed their education into an industry. The industry aims at making money from international students. I calculated the fee for each class I attended which was around 5000 yuan (equal to £595). It is expensive and profitable. My first reaction was that this price was outrageous. No matter how good the education is, you cannot charge a lesson for 5000 yuan. (Luo/M/Languages)

Not many students explored the rationale behind the tuition fees but viewed the fact that they were charged the 'expensive' tuition fee as commercial behaviour. However, they claimed the demand is higher than what can be supplied. Therefore, the price can go high enough when the rate does not influence the sale.

The tuition fee is very expensive, but more and more Chinese families are better off and can afford it. Studying abroad has become one of the life options. If their children want to go abroad, they will support them. The demand keeps increasing, and no matter how expensive the tuition fees are, there will always be a market. (Yang/M/Engineering and Technology)

### 6.3.2.2 Different tuition fee schemes

One-third of students (n=17/51) referred to the difference in tuition fees between UK and international students as a market-led operation when they argued that universities and UK governments were making money from international students.

I think it's just that my feeling comes from the fact that our international students cost twice as much as the local students, almost more than twice as much. (Cao/M/Education)

Students who studied in Scotland noticed an even larger difference in tuition fee schemes. Ren illustrated:

Home students do not have to pay tuition fees for their undergraduate, but international students are charged the same rate as the rest of UK universities. Although postgraduate education is not free for local students, the tuition fees are still significantly different. This difference means the government and universities target international students more to generating revenues. (F/Subjects allied to medicine)

### **6.3.2.3 Rising tuition fees**

The last feature is students' observation of the increased rate of tuition fees at the postgraduate level. Fang paid for her first master's degree in China with £350 per year for three years and was covered by a scholarship. When she did her second master's in education in the UK, she paid £16,000 for the tuition fee. The tuition fee difference between China and the UK did not really make her think, but the increased rate did. When her friend decided to study the same major the following year, she noticed that the fee for the next following year would be £22,000. This was her initial reaction:

It is a clear sign of its marketisation that tuition fees are rising every year, but the actual quality of teaching is not in line with the increase, especially the courses that have been moved online. My friend will have most of her courses online. I do not get why my university is confident with the immediate increase of £6,000. It will be understandable if the quality has a drastic improvement. However, the experience is in sharp decline, yet the university has the guts to charge so much more. (Fang/F/Education)

Interviewees (n=30) considered that demand from postgraduate taught courses is steadily rising, which creates confidence for universities in the UK to charge international students increasingly higher tuition fees. These fees reveal to students a straightforward market-led approach from universities in the UK. They recognised that tuition fees are the revenue which motivates universities to take the market approach. The high demand from overseas is also viewed as accelerating for marketisation of UK higher education.

### 6.3.3 'Easy in and easy out'

The third characteristic of marketisation is associated with admission and assessment. Within the context of marketisation, students emphasised that some universities shifted the focus of admission from selecting students who are fit for the course to hitting the target of student numbers. Therefore, some participants argued that it was easy to get into the universities regardless of their educational backgrounds or language abilities. The assessment was regarded as easy associates with 'majors for profits' or when teachers were under pressure.

#### 6.3.3.1 'Easy in': the admission

An 'easy in and easy out' interpretation to the different levels of admissions and assessments emerged as another major characteristic of marketisation. Thirteen students considered that the focus of admissions has transferred from screening the student's ability and qualification to do the course, to tuition fees and the target of international student numbers. Sun illustrates the perspective in detail.

Marketisation has been around for a long time. At first, I learnt about it through people's comments, and then I also worked within the sector. The term 'cash cow' is very obvious within marketisation. Universities have targeted how many Chinese students they need to recruit each year and how many international students they need to recruit in each department. I hate this behaviour that they recruit students for money. My major is one of the majors created for profit. I feel it is very easy for everyone to get the offer.  
(F/Languages)

Other phenomena are observed to explain why students are associated with admission to marketisation. Firstly, the language and pre-master courses are seen as products to sell to students who fail to meet the entry requirements of postgraduate courses. Guan considered her experience with pre-master courses as consumption.

Money does buy education. As my undergraduate GPA was not high, I took the pre-master course, and my university bar was not high, I got in.... (Guan/F/Education)

Secondly, students observed the changes of educational and language requirements, which for them are the signals of dropping admission standard. Fang illustrated that.

I gained my understanding that universities are over-marketed from the changes in entry requirements, education background and language ability. From 2007 to 2010, my university only recruited students who graduated from Fudan university and equivalent level. Now, you can see students from various backgrounds. They are from institutions neither belonging to project 211 nor 985 but from some third tier and fourth-tier universities. I could not bear that some of my classmates could not speak English and translated everything into Chinese. I wonder how they could come to study Teaching English as a Second Language. (Fang/F/Education)

Thirdly, students tend to compare the admission of UK HEIs with that of the USA and China. The attribute the UK and Australia's relaxed admissions due to the competitive nature of marketisation. The HE education system in China is more about selection through entrance exams and interviews. All participants agreed that getting an offer from top Chinese universities is competitive and challenging. They view the USA HEIs admissions as complicated but less so than China. Participants perceive the purpose of admission to be screening students' abilities and qualifications to study and maintain the university's academic standards. However, they view the UK HEIs increasingly lowering the threshold as another feature of marketisation.

I think the bar of admission in the UK is low. In the case of the US, it's a lot harder to apply. If you have a good GPA, then you need to have a university with a good ranking and your major must match what you want to study. However, in the UK, it is the same threshold as in Australia. The threshold is low. (Lin/M/Business & Administrative Studies)

### **6.3.3.2 'Easy out' with majors for profit**

The first reason students feel it is easy for them to gain a degree is that many majors are perceived as created for profit, which means the aim of these programmes is to make money rather than to develop students' intellectual and personal improvement. Ying shared her interpretation:

For me, the marketisation is maybe similar to the phenomenon that some universities only offer certain majors to Chinese students and only recruit Chinese students. I am not worried about mine being purely for profit as it requires a certain amount of expertise to get started. (F/Architecture, Building & Planning)

While Ying and some other students did not worry about being enrolled in a ‘major for profit’, Qu and six others were acutely aware of being of a programme created to make a profit off Chinese students. The following experiences illustrated the point.

The overall number of students is about 130/150, meaning that nearly 90% are Chinese. The most direct perception is that they have commercialised education, which means that the whole master’s is a profit-making project, and it is up to you to learn what you can. Our teachers will give you serious lessons, but the overall learning environment is not a very positive environment. (Qu/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

I did think that I enrolled in a course just for profit. The promotion of the programme offered me the impression that I could learn a lot. However, I noticed that the bar is quite low, meaning that students from any undergraduate background can get in, but some do not have the basic skills that the course requires. (Xie/F/Creative Arts and Design)

Similarly, Qin was depressed for years due to studying a subject without real interest as an undergraduate and worked in the same area for a couple of years. She set her mind on changing courses for postgraduate studies and fought with her family to finally achieve the chance. However, she has reservations as follow.

Many students around me make me think this major is not as professional as we imagine it to be. As we all come from random backgrounds, some of us did not understand basic concepts at all. However, it seemed fine even though some did not want to work harder to make up the knowledge gap. (Qin/F/Social studies)

The proof of ‘easy out’ they perceived is that the students without the ‘basic skills and language’ graduated successfully and even got the same classification of degree with their peers. This led them to believe that it doesn’t take much to graduate for students enrolled in majors for profit.

### **6.3.3.3 ‘Easy out’ when teachers are under pressures**

Some students explained that one of the reasons for the ‘easy out’ was that teachers were under pressure to not fail students. Zhou expressed her impression: “I can feel that some teachers are under pressure to be strict with their marks because students who are unhappy with their marks will argue and ask for adjustment” (Zhou/F/ Education). Sun (F/Languages) was also told by one

of her teachers that he would set the lowest mark as 50 and then mark them up accordingly due to the pressures of students' complaints. Based on these cases, there would not be many students who failed to graduate.

The observation demonstrated a change in the relationship between the student and the teacher. Chapters 5 and 6 reflect a difference in the student and teacher relationship between the UK and China. Teachers have high autonomy, authority and respect from society, parents and students in China. Therefore, narratives around students' fear of making complaints or taking actions on dissatisfaction were prevalent throughout the interviews. However, the obedient students are seen as those who "will keep going to the teacher to complain after failing, saying for various reasons why they didn't pass, to reach a result that they must pass" in the UK (Qu/F/Business & Administrative Studies). What makes these students change? Despite the data not reaching a deep understanding of this question, there was an expression that a leeway exists for negotiation and renegotiation in the UK HEIs. In addition, one of the services from the 'international student industry chain' is helping students complain about their marks and degrees. Although there was not a case in this study that used the service, they claimed some other students had used them.

### **6.3.4 University ranking**

The last major characteristic students associate with marketisation is the rankings of universities. The theme emerged from the discussion of early stage of decision-making through the consultation with educational agents, universities' marketing and branding and the stage of employment with the labour market in China. As a result, students expressed that ranking became a hegemony criterion of universities and their traits as graduates in the labour market. There are three perspectives provided to explain why students associated the rankings with marketisation.

#### **6.3.4.1 The sale price for agents**

As discussed above, agents turned the league tables into 'shop brochures' and 'face value' of universities when selling their services. Since many students first discover universities through their rankings, it becomes a factor that they find hard to avoid. Later in their information research and decision making, they would keep comparing the rankings among their choices. It seems to students that the rankings are the only criteria to evaluate the quality of the universities.



#### 6.3.4.2 UK oversea marketing and branding

Ying associated marketisation with highly ranked universities as she said: “I have heard about marketisation, but my university is not ranked highly, and I feel that the whole academic atmosphere is very good” (F/Architecture, Building & Planning). The impression came from the university’s education fairs and campaigns in China. UK’s overseas marketing focused on promoting the sector as a whole and highly emphasised universities which are ranked at Top 100. Xiong shared her experience:

I wanted to study in Japan initially. However, I just saw that the UK has so many universities ranked in the top 100, and Japan has only three. Although I kept saying that I was not the one asking for the top 100, then I am. Yes, one does get blown away by the ranking. But now I know it does not seem as important. I learnt I should focus more on what the university really is going to bring to the table and how I match up my interest and background with the teachers and university. I would be able to see more solid things and not look so vaguely. (Xiong/F/Education)

Xie, Du, Tian, Ye, Jiang, and Luo shared the same experience that they attended some oversea education fairs and were deeply attracted by the rankings. As Xie described:

It is difficult to judge the university from other angles when the whole event takes rankings so seriously and prioritises it. Each university has its ranking position marked out, and then you learn the brands such as top 50, top 100 and G5 etc. (Xie/F/Creative Arts and Design)

These students also considered rankings a significant sign of marketisation because they found out that local students did not assign as much value for rankings in the UK. They felt rankings were used as marketing and branding to recruit international students. Yan argued that students who went to some ‘niche’ countries in mainland Europe could actually talk more about what the curriculum is like and what the course experience is like.

I have said before that I want to go to Sweden, and then I have met students who have gone to Sweden, and they seem to talk to me a lot more about what the course is like, and there were some new perspectives on the course and teaching. In contrast, students in the UK seem to care more about rankings and less about what the course has to offer and what the programmes are doing. (Yan/M/Physical Science)

### 6.3.4.3 Labour market

The pressure of not engaging with university rankings also comes from their employability. Students argued that the league tables would be used to filter their CVs. The rate of overseas graduates returning to the Chinese labour market has increased significantly. Students found out that the threshold of overseas returners continued to rise. For example, Yang considered that any students who graduated from the UK a decade earlier would enjoy lots of benefits from overseas graduates' schemes set up by local governments, such as household registration, business funding etc. However, the threshold was raised for graduates from any universities from the Top 200 to now from the Top 100. Rankings have been used as the criteria to limit the number of overseas graduates who can enjoy the benefit. Therefore, the rankings play an important role during the decision-making. Some interviewees (n=20) argued that they only referred to the rankings because of employability. The illustrated answers are:

This is a feeling I got from the job market, if you are not in the top 100, it is not very meaningful to study abroad. The main reason why I would be bothered about the top 100 is the pressure from the job market, so I don't think it makes sense to study if your university is not in the top 100. (Qu/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

HRs are so impatient with universities they do not know. My classmate shared his experience with us. The HR saw his university and asked him to show the university's ranking and refused to believe the ranking was really that high. (Xu/F/Education)

Students (n=10) shared their understanding that the rankings have been used to filter their CVs, and employers classify UK universities into different classes. For example,

As far as I have heard a lot, I think most people just look at QS rankings. And I have heard that HR will classify UK universities into a number of bands. The first band includes Oxbridge, then the second band includes the rest of the golden triangle institutions, the third will be those ranked as world Top 50, and the fourth will be those ranked as world Top 100. (Yan/M/Physical Science)

Rankings are considered just another by-product of the marketisation of higher education. Some

students argued that rankings are meaningless for them. As Ren (female, subject allied to medicine) said, “what am I going to do with the ranking? I can’t brag to myself with, ‘oh, I am in one of the top 100 universities, but somehow I feel I am forced to pay attention to the rankings.” However, ten students chose a major they were interested in over a university with a stronger ranking position. These students refused to play the ‘game’ as Qin claimed: “I am not the one to pick a university for the sake of ranking or reputation. It is better to pick a major you like” (Qin/F/Social studies).

The industry chain from top (such as British council, UK embassy) to the UK universities and then the educational agents and other service providers proves that marketisation of UK higher education in practice is far more aggressive than what has been researched in the literature, which focuses more on policy and academic level.

## **6.4 Attitudes towards marketisation**

After discussed with interview students what does marketisation of UK higher education mean to them, they were asked to share their attitudes, acceptance, or rejections towards the phenomenon. Here interviewees expressed three main opinions.

### **6.4.1 ‘I agree due to the inevitability’**

About 16% of interviewees (n=8) viewed the university’s market-led approach as a strategy to survive without government’s funding and a need to serve the national economy. They agreed with the marketisation and thought it was an inevitable trend. One said: “I understand that there are a lot of realities involved for a university to exist, and they have reason to keep improving to attract many students” (Guan/F/Education). Another concern: “I feel that my university is not focused on money, but I feel that it will soon go bankrupt. It does not benefit from generating income from Chinese students. The ratio of Chinese students is unlike other universities” (Ni/F/Social Studies). Chu (M/Business & Administrative Studies) argued that it is inevitable that higher education services the national economy as “it seems everything is centred on developing the economy, and higher education is not the exception”.

Tong, Luo, Gao, and Yang shared an understanding that marketisation is a part of the internationalisation of higher education. They argued that marketisation helps demolish academic borders and increase competition, increasing the chance of sharing education responsibility internationally.

Marketisation does remove the national boundaries in academics, providing knowledge and resource sharing while simultaneously making competition between prestigious universities. At the moment, it seems to me every stakeholder is able to get what they want. (Tong/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Some countries inevitably need more educational resources to meet the demand. For example, there are so many students in China who fail the domestic college entrance exam and have to seek another path to get degrees. The demand is met when countries can supply. Compared with other manufacturing industries, education is also a quick way to make money. (Gao/M/Languages)

#### **6.4.2 Being neutral on a premise**

All the participants reached one common positive influence of the phenomenon: that more Chinese students will have the opportunity to come to study in the UK. In the meantime, the more they come, the greater revenue universities and the government achieve. Ten students referred to it as a win-win situation. On the individual level, some students considered they even won bigger as they got into better universities. Apart from more opportunities available for Chinese students who can afford the cost and desire the chance and experience, students also considered they contributed to the university revenue and local economy. 17 interviewees were happy to see that the resources are boosted by the revenue generated through international students, since they know that they benefit from these facilities and resources. For example, Lu said “universities get funding to build, and international students can enjoy a resource boost” (F/Education). Lu and Liang both considered that due to the market forces, the UK government is motivated to simplify the visa process and make studying in the UK much more convenient. The chance to enjoy a prestigious education and get a degree from top universities is increased. Dai bluntly illustrated the perceived benefit:

Before coming here, I thought about how I deserved to attend this university. After I learned about the strategy of international education in the UK, I figured out that I am not worthy, but my pounds are. My pounds are real. (Dai/F/Education)

These students appreciate the opportunities brought to them through marketisation, but they hold a premise for being neutral that is Chinese students can learn something (knowledge and skill).

I think I am neutral, but it is also about finding a balance. You (university) can make money, but you only make money when you can pass on knowledge which is useful for students in future, whether it is for their career or personal growth. They need to reflect on what they really sell. I feel the balance needs to be reached. I feel it is understandable because the whole internationalisation of HE is going that way. (Liang/F/Education)

I think there is no problem making money in the first place. However, when the value of money is very low, it is hard to accept. It is because they want to make money so that we have the opportunity to come, but it is not acceptable when they make universities into too commercial. The university should expect you to have intellectual improvement and personal growth. Care for students is essential. Care more about our ideas and opinions. (Ma/F/Languages)

### **6.4.3 The rejection**

The third group of students (n=26/51) rejected to apply marketing strategies to higher education based on their experience. Firstly, students considered that marketisation results in low academic standards and poor study experience. Secondly, the long-term reputation and quality of the UK HE sector would be damaged, and the graduates would not only lose trust from with labour market but also unable to benefit from intellectual improvement and personal growth.

#### **6.4.3.1 'The experience cannot be worse'**

Li (F/Engineering and Technology) and Zong (F/Business & Administrative Studies) considered that universities over-enrolled Chinese students without screening their ability and passion for the subject, leading to a poor language environment and experience. Hua is concerned that:

I honestly think they turn it (HE) into a business but without after-sale service. They recruit many Chinese students but need help to take care of them. The experience is bad now and cannot be worse. (Hua/M/Agriculture & Related subjects/Social studies)

Fang agreed with Hua that over-marketing would negatively impact the standard and experience.

The expanding enrolment is the result of marketisation. The university expanded the major from 70 students to more than 100, and this year it expanded to more than 200 students.

It is a course that requires professionalism as they will be teachers. However, recruiting all kinds of students damages the quality. The experience cannot be worse.  
(Fang/F/Education)

Over enrolment was regarded as one of many issues deteriorating the experience. Those ‘easy in’ students were accused of not making efforts and affecting others’ experience by disengagement and even taking speculative approaches to achieve the degrees. The behaviour is criticised by students who disagree with marketisation. Although they believe that ability and efforts lead to academic success, those with the willingness and desire to study should be offered the chance. However, students see dedication as the path to opportunity and that increased effort can compensate for the lack of ability. Therefore, students did not resent universities offering places to students who might not qualify, but criticised students who fail to make an effort and impact the experience of others, thereby devaluing the degree. In addition, students disagree with marketisation because it shifts the focus of higher education from educating students to generating revenue so that ‘easy in’ students can also be ‘easy out’. Marketisation discourages students from making efforts in their studies and encourages them to take consumerist approaches.

#### **6.4.3.2 Reputation damage**

Students are concerned that marketisation in the long term will jeopardise the contribution of universities to society and lifelong learning. Without regulation, the quality of postgraduate education will devastate the overall reputation of UK higher education.

I think it is devastating and pessimistic. The demand is high now as the domestic credential involution in China. However, the quality of UK HE is just slipping down. They have only an interest in making money which is short-sighted. The reputation of UK higher education used to be one of the best. Now students tend to talk more about other experiences embedded in the journey, and the education itself is just not enough anymore.  
(Jin/M/Engineering and Technology)

The reputation damage also comes along with the public and labour market in China distrusting the students who did postgraduate education in the UK. The concern of graduates returning home with ‘nothing’ and graduating from a ‘marketistied’ HE sector has reflected on the most common critical discourse associated with returners which is 水硕 ‘shuishuo’. (Directly translated as ‘watery

master’). The term is controversial and has not a universal definition. However, the following narratives are typical and present how interviewees interpret the critical discourse.

It describes students who graduated from a university that targets international students for profit and does not screen the quality of students...my university has been scolded online for doing that for quite a while. (Fu/F/Education)

The ‘shuishuo’ argument is a twofold idea. On the one hand, we cannot deny that the proportion of Chinese students enrolled in the UK in the past few years has been increasing. From the economic point of view, when many people hold a UK master’s degree, the value is decreased. People just don’t think it is a very tough thing to do. On the other hand, we can see that many students are unable to be admitted due to the Chinese PG entry exam. Then students who want a master’s to have to choose options like the UK. Students failed to go to an average university at home but were admitted by some world-class institutions in the UK, which caused the argument naturally. (Cai/F/Combined)

‘Shuishuo’ turns to public opinion. I think there must be a certain reason why so many people agree. It is true that some people come to the UK for a year and refuse to step out of their comfort zone to use the language and study the course. These people returned to China and faced HR’s reaction like, ‘how come you cannot communicate in English and achieve a degree from a top English university?’ I think the discourse originally came from the human resource department when they were constantly shocked by the performance of graduates from the UK. (Gao/M/Languages)

All participants recalled that they had encountered such narratives in Chinese social media. Some interviewees (n=15) were under pressure when they read the ‘shuishuo’ comments, while others (n=13) students did not care at all. Some students (n=7) agreed with the discourse and confessed, for example:

Although I won’t call myself a ‘watery master’, I really feel that I did not learn anything after I finished my studies. I would think if I studied in China, I would learn better. If I went to the US, I would be less ‘watery’ and would learn more solidly. (Ma/F/Languages)

Seven other students like Ma continued with PhD studies, and five were in the application process. One of the main reasons is that more than one year is needed for them to do the deep learning and research. Students who did not take their studies further had some difficulties in confidence. Xie was looking for a job when she was interviewed. This is her reflection on her experience with ‘shuishuo’:

I see these posts all the time. I do partly agree with what they said. I am looking for jobs now, but I am not confident that what I learnt matches the degree. The courses were quite general, so I cannot claim that I have the technical skills the drawing companies require. While I learn some things from the business school but not enough to go to marketing companies. (Xie/F/Creative Arts and Design)

Chu (M/Business & Administrative Studies) claimed that his programme was a major for profit. He felt his courses were designed with an introductory level, which meant he could get high marks and a good degree. However, these the achievements without genuine educational purpose made feel a lack of confidence and was ‘wasted’. The ‘easy in and easy out’ did not bring him full satisfaction. The conversation is illustrated:

Chu: The programme was really simple, basic, just not very profound. Probably because they needed to meet a wide range of students with different backgrounds.

Interviewer: Were you happy with the easy course and did you get high marks?

Chu: Half and half, I think. Yes, good grades.

Interviewer: What made you half unhappy?

Chu: They kept it simple, so it was good to get high marks, but the rate of your growth was also reduced.

Interviewer: Can you explain more about the growth?

Chu: Your study, the foundation of your knowledge. It is just you know how much you have learnt and how much you can actually learn.

## 6.5 Chapter summary

This chapter provides findings related to Chinese students’ understanding of the marketisation of UK higher education and the impacts of that on their lives and study experiences. The main tone that emerged from the data does not support the phenomenon and the commercial services around it. While students consider the tuition fees to be expensive, higher than domestic students, and



continually increasing, they accommodate these phenomena as universities need to survive and thrive with sufficient funding. They agree with the prospect of making money from international students, but a balance needs to be reached. Students care about their passion for subjects, knowledge learning and personal growth. Therefore, they appreciate that more chances are offered through marketisation but disagree with students unfit for the course taking the opportunity for granted by not making an effort. They disagree with the claimed ‘majors for profit’ allowing students who are ‘unfit’ without dedication to graduate easily. Although most students are concerned about the rankings, some find they are forced to play the game. They are under pressure not to engage with the rankings due to the importance that agents, universities and the labour marketplace on them.

There are three main attitudes towards marketisation. The students that agreed with marketisation considered it an inevitable trend. They considered that we live in a society where “everything is centred on developing the economy”. Consequently, marketisation is a part of the internationalisation of higher education. Students that claimed to be neutral considered that fundings is important to the university’s development. Therefore, when more students are offered the chance to study in the UK, more revenue will be generated to develop the universities, leading to a win-win situation. However, these students also emphasised that a balance should be achieved. They hope more international students benefit from the chance but desire a good learning experience and to achieve knowledge, skills and personal growth. The last argument focuses on the disagreement with marketisation. Students consider the university’s long-term reputation will be eroded by the short-sighted goal of immediate cash at the expense of academic standards and integrity. Most importantly, they consider the reputation is being damaged as the graduates returning to China face doubts and distrust.

## Chapter 7 ‘No way, how am I a consumer?’

### 7.1 Introduction

While a growing literature focuses on students’ perspectives and perceptions of consumerism and consumerist discourses within higher education (e.g., Tomlinson, 2017; Brooks, 2022; Reynolds, 2022), international students are largely excluded from the exploration and investigation. The current discussion and debates of consumerist discourses often overlook international students’ perceptions and experiences. This chapter explores how Chinese students understand consumerism within the context of UK higher education by reflecting on their construction of identities in practice. Chapter 6 presented a wide recognition of a marketised system among interviewees. This chapter aims to answer if Chinese students position themselves as consumers and how they perceive consumerism within their postgraduate education. The chapter draws upon quantitative and qualitative results to examine students’ consumer orientation and attitudes through exploring instrumentalism and entitlement.

This chapter starts with a general understanding of the discourse: students as consumers within higher education by encouraging the interviewees to engage with the concept. The correlation between tuition fees and consumer identity is then explored to answer whether paying tuition fees triggers their consumerist mindset. Then the question of whether students adopt instrumental attitudes and approaches towards their postgraduate education is investigated through an understanding of their consumer rights, the measurement of value of money and their action on dissatisfactions. The chapter is closed with some conclusion statements.

### 7.2 First reaction to the identity of ‘student-as-consumer’

Compared with the understanding of marketisation, consumerism and the consumer discourse were relatively new subjects to the participants in the interviews. Over 70% of interview participants (n=36) reported it was their first time encountering the concept of students as consumers when they participated in the survey. They reported initially feeling surprised, confused and ambivalent about the discourse when first encountering the phrase in the survey. In the interviews, when encountering the first question on consumerism (“Had you heard or thought about students as consumer discourse or similar concepts applied to higher education before taking my survey and interview?”), 11 responded with ‘never heard of it’ and 12 answered with ‘never thought about it’. There were another 13 students who replied that they had no sense of the

concept at all. However, they considered the subject interesting, and they were passionate about contributing their thoughts. Extra meaning was added when participants are provoked to engage with the identity of consumer legitimated by the UK government, but most claimed to 'have no idea what the concept is' when reflecting on their perspectives and experiences. Wei's process of reflection typically represented the rest:

When I did your survey yesterday, for the first time to think about myself on the role of consumer, I really think I really have not thought about this before, I really think this is a very interesting point, I'll do it (think and participate in the interview), I'll think back carefully, I really did not think of myself as a consumer! And then I thought back, I did, when did I?... (Wei/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

It is interesting to note that five students (Wei, Cai, Hua, Ye, Fang) had two postgraduate education experiences, each with at least one in the UK. However, their reactions towards the consumer identity were all very similar. It was their first time to positioning themselves as consumers and relating the identity to their experiences and emotions. A process of making connections, rejecting and/or accepting was first captured in this study.

Ten interviewees associated the discourse with the 'purchasing power' of Chinese students after a long pause and thinking. Although the question set the context of the identity within higher education in the UK, the initial perception of the identity centred around the conventional consumption. There were no connections between students as consumers of university or postgraduate education initially. These students either interpreted consumerism as buying luxury goods or having posh lifestyles.

Never thought about it. But I wouldn't position myself as a 'consumer' of the university. But I would say that the Chinese student community is a big 'consumer' in the UK. Lots of luxury shops are full of Chinese, and some Chinese students go to fancy restaurants and buy luxury cars, just lots and lots. (Tian/F/Education)

Apart from the sense of Chinese students being powerful consumers of local merchants, some students understood the concept as being normal consumers of the tangible services the campus provided, such as café, bookstores and facilities provided by the university. Their perception of consumerism was limited to purchasing services and goods with straightforward results and easily

judging the quality. They argued that within these aspects, they positioned themselves as consumers, and it is the consumer's right to give feedback on the quality of these services. For example, Lu argued that the concept of students as consumers should only be associated with the support and services rather than learning in the universities. She illustrated, "I have experienced a sense of service to the library, the cafeteria, but I cannot equate these services to the learning and teaching experience." (Lu/F/Education)

The first explanation for the unfamiliarity of the discourse was their educational background within a different HE system, which resulted in the lack of understanding of the positioning. Wu considered that:

Most universities in China are public institutions. They will not be privatised, so I have no concept of students as consumers at all, I will not have the mindset. So, when I saw the survey, I would have questions about why you are studying this. (Wu/F/social studies)

Here, Wu interpreted that consumer identity is only associated with private institutions. Her question of why I was researching the topic further confirms her assumption as she did not think her current English institution was a private university. Wu and Sun perceived that market-led logics only applied to private universities. State-funded institutions have no need to 'please' consumers. Sun considered that with the Chinese education system, students have to 'please' HEIs by working hard to meet the entry requirements and be 'managed' by their universities.

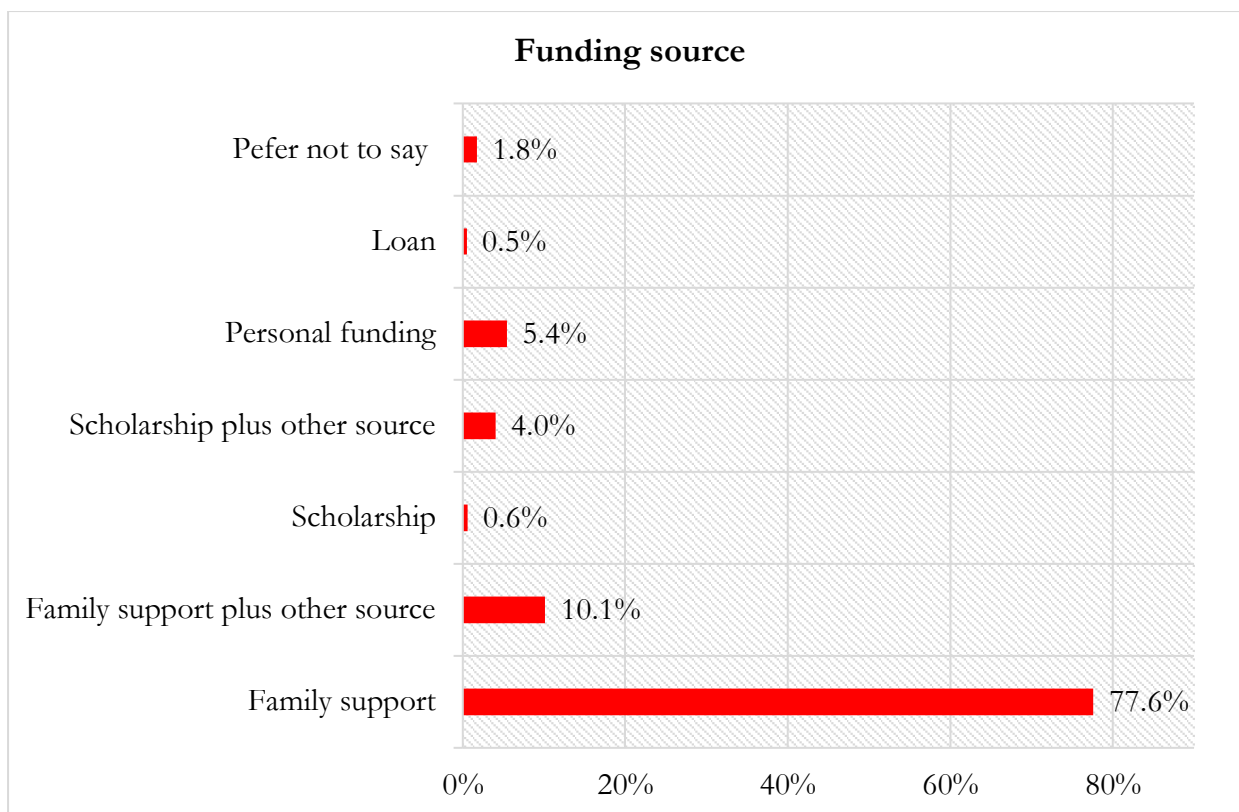
In China, private universities might align with the market-led logics, but the state-funded universities should not. I don't think it (HE sector) needs to please the students, and the college entrance exam are quite difficult. It is hard to say it is 100% fair, but the selection system means students always must work hard to get an offer. It is hard to apply the discourse within this kind of context. In addition, there is very little tuition fees, and universities have state funding, so the relationship between university and student, teacher and student are different. The attitudes of university and teachers towards students are more like management rather than service, as in the UK. (Sun/F/Languages)

Among 51 students, apart from 36 without engagement with the discourse, the rest of 15 students responded that they had thought or heard about it. 15 interviewees shared three ways that they engaged with the identity. Firstly, students such as Fu and Yu considered they had a higher chance

to be admitted in Top 100 world universities compared to the chance in China. Therefore, the 'easy in' had provoked them to engage with the discourse. Although they both defended that they bought an opportunity, not the degree per se. Secondly, students such as Liang and Xu who shared their poor learning experience in Chapter 5 had a better understanding of the consumerist identity as they felt their teachers treated them as consumers or products with careless attitudes applied in the classroom. Thirdly, students such as Zhou and Dai learned the discourse through their modules or had working experience within the sector. For example, Zhou shared a typical path for participants who had gained the knowledge about the identity before the interview:

It (the module) is Higher Education. The teacher used the discourse when he was talking about the commercialisation of higher education and the mobility of international students, and I thought, 'isn't that closely related to me?' And then I had a very intense discussion with him about whether international students should be considered as 'consumers' or whether the commercialisation of UK higher education was the right thing to do? (Zhou/F/Education)

Although this study has successfully recruited participants who were passionate about sharing their perceptions and experience, the recruiting process captured some 'intense' reactions. For example, an interviewee dropped out after completing the survey as she considered the discourse 'offensive'. Furthermore, many participants didn't complete their survey, with some reporting back with a sense of disliking the identity. One participant went as far to add my social media account and left some long voice messages justifying how irrational the discourse is, expressing her 'anger' with my research. Regardless of whether participants found the topic interesting and were willing to contribute their thoughts, or felt offended and rejected to participate, they all took a high stake in the subject rationally or emotionally because their social and public identity matters to them.



*Figure 7.3 Funding source of survey participants*

### 7.3 Paying tuition fees = being consumers?

Figure 7.3 illustrates participants' funding sources; most students (87.7%) have financial support from their families. It shows that nearly 90% of students are consumers in financial terms. However, does paying tuition fees automatically make students position themselves as consumers, and especially earlier chapters revealed that the cost of participants' undergraduate education was significantly lower than what they have to pay in the UK. Do the significantly higher tuition fees trigger students' consumerist mindset?

#### 7.3.1 The discourse is justified due to tuition payment

51.1% (n=433) agreed (including 11% (n=93) strongly agreed) with the following statement:

Concerning the university, I attended/am attending; I think of myself primarily as a consumer of the university.

Interviewees who answered that they never thought or heard of the consumer identity but agreed with the statement were asked to provide the reasons of their choice. Ying explained why she agreed with the statement:

It is true that I have never seen my postgraduate education through the lens of being a consumer. However, facing the statement for the first time, I agreed with it as paying tuition fees identified me as a consumer of the university. We are consumers paying to enjoy the services that teachers and the university provide. Never thought about it, but it is justified. (F/Architecture, Building & Planning)

Interviewees felt the high costs associated with UK HEIs were worthwhile in comparison to the huge amount of time and effort required for Chinese academic selection schemes, not to mention the high chance of failing to gain entry. In addition, the students who successfully changed their subject areas, which is less likely to happen domestically, also recognised the power of their tuition fees. (Section 4.2.2.2 provided detail discussion on this)

### **7.3.2 Lack of correlation**

While paying tuition fees becomes a justification for the concept of students as consumers, some participants do not consider that paying tuition fees make them consumers. Compared with the students from England who witnessed the undergraduate tuition fee reforms and might have experienced the tripling of tuition fees, Chinese students without that experience considered that paying tuition fees is the default and does not necessarily shift them to consumers. For them, it is common for international students to pay more to have an education abroad.

It is just like in my country, you have to pay tuition to go to university. As for paying more tuition fees than local students I haven't thought much about this either. Tuition fees did not provoke the consumer mindset as it was normal to pay tuition fees. (Liu/F/Education)

Qu rejected the concept immediately as she considered the high fee she paid in the UK as the status of an international student. However, the act of paying higher and more fees does not shift her to the consumer role.

I didn't think of it that way. My thoughts were still the same as when I did undergraduate, that is, I also had to pay tuition fees for university, only that there was a state subsidy for undergraduates. Our tuition fees were on the low side. In the UK for international students,

tuition fees were on the high side. I didn't see myself as a consumer. (Qu/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

In contrast to students who considered paying tuition fees an easy way to access postgraduate education with better universities, where they considered themselves consumers, Ye felt that paying tuition fees did not make her consumer because "the university is selective and not everyone can get in even if they want to pay tuition fees". She reasoned that her ability and effort make her qualified to study at the university instead of paying tuition fees.

Because I was selected, that is. I'm the one that they pick and choose. I'm also the one who is selected out of, say, 100 people. So, I just don't have that strong of a concept of 'consumer'. No, more or less you're spending money, you're definitely spending money, but the reason I'm not pro the consumer identity is because I'm among a lot of people and they pick me out. I just felt like I had the feeling that I was relying on my own learning and my level of capability to get an opportunity like this one. But you must pay for it. (Ye/F/Creative Arts and Design)

Ye argued that the selectivity of her university conflicts with the idea of students being consumers. Apart from the normal admission, her programme required students to submit a piece of work and then attend a panel interview when she passed the first-round selection. The extra requirement demanded much more efforts and longer preparation than other applicants, which put her in a more confident position that she was selected because of her academic capability and professional skills.

### **7.3.3 'I bought an opportunity'**

Although in the survey, 48.6% (n=412) of respondents agreed to think of their postgraduate education as a product, only 13.5% (n=114) of respondents agreed with 'because I paid the tuition, the university I attend owes me a degree'. The qualitative data offered more nuanced explanations for the difference. Students like Ying, who previously agreed that she thought of herself primarily as a consumer of the university and postgraduate education as a product, chose not to agree that the university owed her a degree due to the tuition she paid. She further explained her choices:



It is a fact that we pay for the chance to enjoy the education here in the UK. However, the degree is an outcome that you can't just consume. What you pay entitles you to enjoy the process of learning. (Ying/F/Architecture, Building & Planning)

Students who avoided the competitive and selective domestic PG entry exam particularly had a greater sense of consumerism. However, the consumer mentality remained at the early stage when they got the offer and paid the tuition fees. Gu illustrated a common interpretation:

Like the item in the survey, I think my PG education is a product to buy. I am a consumer, but it is just the justification of the money I spend on it. But that does not mean that the university has to give me a degree. I am consuming an academic opportunity. It's like I have spent money to create the opportunity for myself to be re-educated. (Gu/F/Creative Arts and Design)

The introduction of tuition fees is argued as a catalyst for students acted consumer-like and trigger the education process as transactional services (Tomlinson, 2017; Jabbar et al., 2017). The findings above indicate that students can associate the tuition they paid with the consumer discourse, but the correction is more complex than straightforward. The interviewees who are lack of knowledge of the tuition reforms in England did consider paying tuition fee is default. The idea of paying more is also considered as normal triggered by their social status: international students. The tuition fees are interpreting as buying an education opportunity not a degree. Students among interviews did not express that the consumer orientation towards their education due to the tuition fee they paid.

## **7.4 Instrumentalism**

This section focuses on whether students construct an instrumental view towards postgraduate education to get a better job and achieve more economic gains, or to motivate them to engage with a subject with genuine interest without worrying too much about employability and financial return.

### **7.4.1 Learning to get a better job?**

There were only 26.3% (n=233) of the respondents who agreed with the statement in the survey that:

“For me, university is more of a place to get training for a specific career than to gain a general education.”

There were detailed responses from interviewees who disagreed with the statement and said what they considered university should be. For example, Ding shared her doubt when her undergraduate school promoted a slogan with 90% employment rate for graduates. She wondered whether the employment rate is that important for a comprehensive institution as it is a metric intended for vocational universities (Ding/F/Social Studies). Furthermore, interview participants (n=5) argued that universities should not bind with the labour market to foster graduates with the skills employers require. Qin illustrated:

I think that university and learning cannot be a driving force for employment. Universities should focus on assisting students to grow and reflect. The aim of university should be to develop students' full capability to have better life skills such as logical, problem solving and confidence. (Qin/F/social studies)

Similarly, Wang disagrees that university should be a place for vocational purposes, and she urged students not to hold an instrumental attitude towards their education.

Students should lower the expectation of monetary rewards but expect more self-improvement. If studying is just about choosing a major for a higher salary and not caring about your own interests then it defeats the purpose of education in the first place, so why bother with doing it? (Wang/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

In the survey, only 25.5% (n=216) agreed with “If I could get a well-paying job without doing a master's degree in England, I would not be here” and 50% of the participants believed coming to England to study postgraduate means more than a well-paying job to them. The interview data also proved that students would choose to study in England over a good job. 14 interviewees either had well-paying jobs or the opportunity to get one. However, they still chose to study in the UK. For example, Fu stated:

My job was very easy, good paid with less workload. So, people around me felt a bit jealous. However, it would be like a mental torture if I cannot see the world outside...A stable life

without personal growth is stressful. Life was easy, but not the way I wanted it to be.  
(Fu/F/Education)

Peng and Pan considered that the degree would not be helpful for their career prospects because they had looked for jobs, and they claimed there was no difference regardless of having a master's degree from the UK HEIs. Peng claimed: "I have looked for a job, I know there (having or without an English degree) was no difference, it did not make much difference" (Peng/F/social studies). Students like Peng and Pan expressed there was not a straightforward link between a master's degree and the labour market. They recognised that fact before they embarked on their PG studies in the UK. The findings share the similarity with Brooks & Everett's (2009) research on British young adults reflected on the value of degree, which a degree or academic success will not automatically lead to a well-paid job.

Around a third of survey respondents agreed with "I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career" and "it is more important for me to have a high paying career than one I really like". Chapter 4 has revealed that 59% of participants changed their subject area from undergraduate to postgraduate mainly because they wanted a chance to study a subject, they were interested in. Students who tried to follow their parents' instrumental guidance, and took a major they disliked for undergraduate, found the journey was a disaster. Majority of interviewees had sufficient financial support to correct their mistakes without being too instrumental and concerned with getting a better job.

More importantly, students with a Western credential might be regarded as more favourable in Chinese labour market. However, Tran et al (2021) found that a Chinese graduate returner could be regarded as 'not as localised as the labour market needs' (p.949). The authors argued that Chinese companies are concerned that Chinese graduates lack local knowledge and might look for additional value such as international business networks. Interviewees in Chapter 6 section **6.4.3.2** also revealed that the Chinese labour market holds a critical attitude towards graduates who cannot match their capability with a degree from a top ranking or prestigious university. The rising awareness of UK marketisation among Chinese society and labour market also cannot provide students with a firm 'yes' for 'learning to get a better job?' Majority of the interviewees have the acute awareness of the criticism and also the understanding that a master's degree cannot provide them an automatic well-paid job or success in work. Without bearing the incentives of getting a

better job in mind while studying their PG in the UK, students did not show the disappointment as the survey and the interviews results suggested.

#### **7.4.2 Learning to maximise economic returns?**

While 42.8% of survey respondents (n=363) disagreed with the statement: “the financial returns on my postgraduate course are not very important to me”, 23.6% (n=200) agreed with “the main purpose of my postgraduate should be maximising my ability to earn money.” The financial returns are important but maximising the ability to earn money is not the main purpose for most survey respondents studying postgraduate. Only 9.9% (n=84) of the survey respondents agreed with the statement “If I cannot earn a lot of money after I graduate, I will have wasted my time at university in the UK”, and 68.9% (n=584) disagreed (including 22.4%, n=190 strongly disagreed).

Reinforcing the point that students do not necessarily have to be instrumental, Chinese students’ comfortable family background was observed. Lin (M/Management) stated: “people around me do not relate their experience with the tuition fees they pay”, and Wang stated:

For those who can come to study in the UK, the cost is usually not too much for families to bear. However, that does not mean everyone who comes here is rich. The students surrounding me have quite a luxurious lifestyle. My observation is that there is no shortage of money. None of my classmates come to study with family burden and external pressure.  
(F/Business & Administrative Studies)

The reflection shows that students with sufficient financial support have more confidence about their choices and are not constrained to do things they prefer due to either current or future economic concerns. On the contrary, students with financial pressures are conscious about their choices, such as employment and lifestyle. In the qualitative study, three out of fifty-one interviewees reported that the cost might cause stress for them or their families. Jin shared that his parents had to sacrifice their choices for him. However, Jin’s financial pressure did not lead to him and his parents with a strong desire for economic returns. He said:

My parents gave up their choices to offer me more choices. For example, they had choices to buy a bigger house, or have nicer holidays. But they gave up these choices to make sure I will always be able to choose what I want. My parents were conscious of their spending,

but never limited mine. They want me to grow by seeing more and to explore the boundary of self-limitation, and to choose something I like which they might not have been able to choose when they were at my age. (Jin/M/Technology & Engineering)

In addition, some interviewees proved that learning to gain more economic return was not realistic. Cao was one of the students with financial pressure and he had to do part-time jobs and manage the living expenses at “half the budget of what other students spend” (M/Education). Under this circumstance, Cao was asked about his expectation for future economic return. He shared the reality of the Chinese labour market and the average salary in his subject area.

The current employment environment in China is not friendly for our generation and it is difficult to make anything on our own ...Afterwards, I work as a counsellor with a 5,000-yuan per month salary (about £586), it might take me three or four years, five or six years to earn the cost of my postgraduate back. But I won't regret the one-year experience. (Cao/M/Education)

Interview participants understood the economic return would not be proportional to what they paid, especially with the approximate 8.5 times difference in currency rate. Fang illustrated her perspectives:

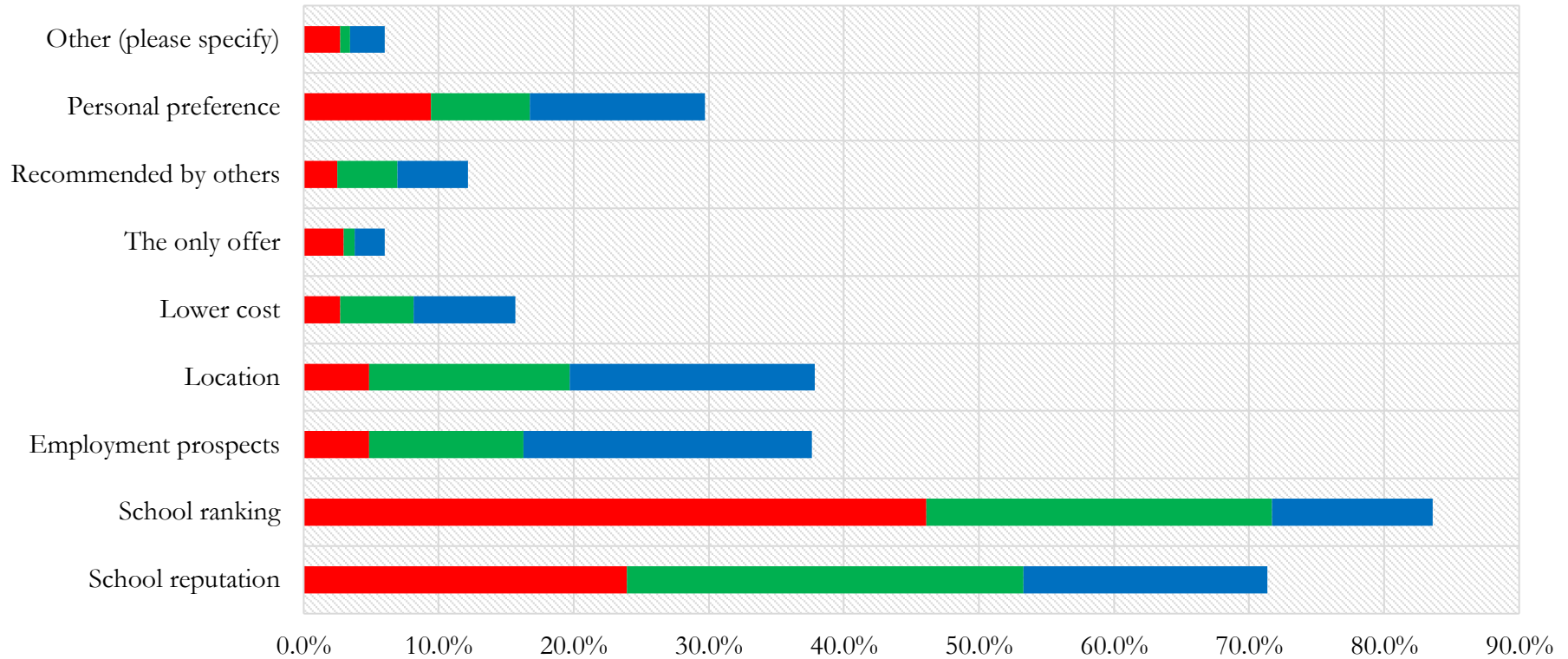
It will not be a good or proportional investment when it comes to the future income. How much money have I put in for my study here? And when I am back home, the starting salary can be only 3,000 yuan (about £352 per month) (laughter). (Fang/F/ Education)

Both students studied Education which is perceived as a relatively low-earning subject area. A report called ‘2021 Employment Survey Report of Chinese Returnees’ by Zhilian (2021), the second biggest recruitment agent in China, showed that the recruitment salary for overseas returnees increased rapidly, reaching 13,719 yuan/month (about £1610) in 2021. Although the figure is much higher than what Cao and Fang perceived, the report revealed that only 30.3% of returnees considered that the salary met their expectations. However, 75.3% of returnees considered their achievement of overseas study met their expectations. These figures show that economic return is not a major evaluation of achievement for Chinese graduates returning to China.

### **7.4.3 Learning to have a master's degree from top universities?**

As figure 7.4.3a shows that university ranking, reputation and location take over the employment prospects as the most selected reasons why students chose their universities. Interviewees provided further explanations. There are three main reasons why they desire to have a master's degree from British universities, especially from those with high-ranking positions on the league table. Firstly, interviewees (n=20) considered that a master's degree might offer them more job opportunities. With the massification of higher education, students with bachelor's degrees felt they had lost their advantage in the labour market. For example, Luo stated: "I always planned to do postgraduate studies because a bachelor's degree was not that advantageous in the domestic environment" (M/Languages).

### What are the top three reasons why you chose to study at this university in the UK?



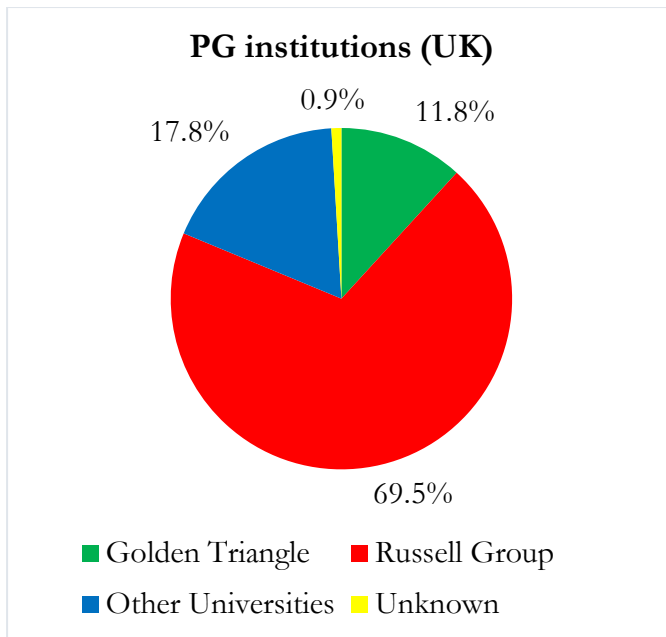
	School reputation	School ranking	Employment prospects	Location	Lower cost	The only offer	Recommended by others	Personal preference	Other (please specify)
■ 1st Choice	23.9%	46.1%	4.8%	4.8%	2.7%	2.9%	2.5%	9.4%	2.7%
■ 2nd Choice	29.4%	25.6%	11.4%	14.9%	5.4%	0.8%	4.5%	7.3%	0.7%
■ 3rd Choice	18.0%	11.9%	21.3%	18.2%	7.5%	2.2%	5.2%	13.0%	2.6%

Figure 7.4.3a: top three reasons to choose a university

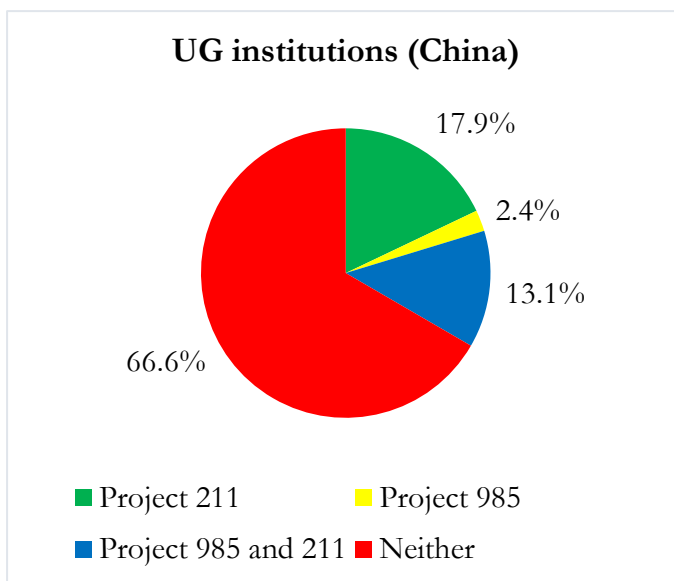
Secondly, interviewees perceived that having a degree from an institution with a strong ranking position and reputation might help them to pass the first stage of CV selection and get a chance to be interviewed. Waters (2023) claimed that international students with prestigious credentials could “find their CV at the top of the pile” when they return to domestic labour markets (p.161). However, students in this study showed less confidence than that, instead, emphasising that having a degree from top ranking universities has become the minimum threshold. For example, Xia claimed “I only applied to top 100 world class universities as it is the minimum threshold for the job market”. (M/Social Studies)

An analysis of HESA data of the trends in participation of Chinese students in UK HEIs found as increasing number of Chinese students graduated from Russell Group universities (Iannelli & Huang, 2014). According to figure 7.4.3b, over 80% of survey respondents were from Russell Group universities, with 11.8% in the Golden Triangle institutions. According to the QS ranking, all the Russell Group institutions are ranked in the top 200 universities in the world. Among all the interviewees, only four come from non-top 200 institutions in the UK. The interviews reflected their desires to go to prestigious institutions. As the ‘Gaokao’ (Chinese college entry exam) is complete and selective, the chance to go to top universities in China is very low. There are currently 1,270 universities in China. 39 of them are part of project 985, 112 of them are part of projects 211 and 26 institutions are part of both. Among these institutions, only eight are ranked as Top 200 according to the QS ranking 2023. In 2021, there were 11,930,000 high school graduates who attended ‘Gaokao’, and only 5.01% of students could enter project 211 institutions, and 1.62% could be admitted by project 985 institutions (Ministry of Education, 2022). According to figure 7.4.3c, 66.6% of the survey participants did not attend Chinese prestigious universities for their undergraduates, and less than 2.4% of participants attended Top 200 world universities. The desire to have a degree from prestigious institutions in the UK is highly to be met as 81.3% (n=689) of survey respondents were in the Top 200 universities. Attending prestigious and top world universities for some students has met their expectation.





*Figure 7.4.3b: survey respondents PG institutions*



*Figure 7.4.3c: survey respondents UG institutions*

## 7.5 Entitlement

According to the UK government policy (BIS, 2011; BIS 2016), the main reasons students should be consumers is that they are entitled to demand transparent information, good value of money from their institutions and to enjoy the government’s protection. In practice, researchers are concerned that students might interpret the consumer rights as having their degrees with minimum efforts (e.g., Molesworth et al 2009; Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011). This section presents the

survey results and interview interpretation of Chinese students' perspectives on their entitlement through two aspects: consumer rights and actions on dissatisfactions.

### **7.5.1 Perceptions of 'consumer rights'**

As HE regulator, the Office for Students (OfS) claimed that “we want every student to have a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers” (OfS, 2023), and it recently partnered with National Trading Standards to identify and tackle any breach of student-consumer protection legislation so that and consumer's interests and rights will be protected across England (Office for Students, 2022). However, in this study, interview participants (n=51) were generally unfamiliar with the consumerist discourse and not aware that they have any consumer rights. None of them know the existence of the Office for Students or Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

I did not have the idea, I felt I was rather naïve. I did not know what else I could ask for. I didn't have the sense that I was entitled to something. (Ma/F/Languages)

Chinese students really don't enjoy the benefits of consumer positioning as we are in a foreign country, and we are not familiar with how the system works. (Pan/F/Architecture, Building & Planning)

Being in a foreign country was emphasised as the reason why they are not entitled to consumer rights. Without knowing the HE regulator and adjudicator, students argued there is nothing they can do to demand the rights or confront the university's wrongdoings. Even knowing there are regulators, Chapter 6 revealed that 34/51 students did not separate the UK government and HE sector regarding marketisation, which made them think it is impossible to make universities accountable, as Yang (M/Engineering and Technology) concerned: “The UK government would not protect our 'consumer rights' as the government will not choose international students over the HE sector if a dispute occurs.”

Another controversial perspective about consumer rights is that international students pay more than local students, which provokes students to ask if 'consumers rights' exist, why do they have to pay more than local students and not have more 'rights' and better 'service' from universities? For example, Lu argued that:

If the tuition I pay positions me as a consumer in the classroom, like I am a consumer to the cafeteria, does not mean that I paid twice more than the local students, then the teachers should offer me twice more time and support? (Lu/F/Education)

Although Lu spotted the conflict, she did not believe that was education should be. She further explained: “I think that will be unfair to the teacher and other students, then I myself get treated particularly well in the classroom because I pay that extra money, I would be uncomfortable”. (Lu/F/Education)

There are a few statements in the survey to examine how respondents see their entitlement as consumers. The first is “Because I have paid the tuition, the university I attend owes me a degree”. Only 13.5% (n=114) agreed with the statement, while 57.5% (n=488) disagreed. Qu expressed her opinions against the statement.

By paying this tuition fee I am buying an entry ticket and it is up to me to get the degree at the end. I can't understand at all that there are people who think that by paying this money, they will get the final degree. Because it's completely impractical. (Qu/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Students did not have a strong sense of entitlement, which was also reflected on their choice of the following statements. Only 13.9% (n=118) agreed while 58.8% (n=499) disagreed with, “it is part of my professors' job to make sure I pass my courses”. In terms of entitlement of a good grade, 31.1% (n=264) agreed that “As long as I complete all of my assignments, I deserve a good grade in a course”. And 34% (n=288) agreed with “My teachers should round up my final course grade one or two points if I am close to the next letter grade”.

A majority of respondents did not consider that they were entitled to good grades without putting effort into studying. Many participants had the same thought with Xiong (F/Education) who considered her teachers to have a much better academic ability than her and she would accept their assessment criteria and not argue the decision.

### **7.5.2 Actions on dissatisfaction**

Current literature considers complaints as a significant trait of students being consumers. Finney & Finney (2010) suggested that students self-identified themselves as consumers are more likely

to make complaints as they feel universities owe them a certain outcome. Tomlinson (2014) found a similar result in which students could ask for a refund from a show that dissatisfied them in the same way as a lecture without entertainment elements. This section discloses Chinese students' experience and perceptions on responding to their dissatisfaction within universities.

### 7.5.2.1 Non-action response

FitzPatrick et al (2012) argued that Chinese students as the largest source of international mobility all over the world, were paid less attention to their complaint behaviours. The authors examined Chinese students' responses to dissatisfaction in New Zealand HEIs and found out Chinese students took a specific non-action mode towards their dissatisfaction. Aligned with the finding, most interviewees (n=43/51) in this study chose not to take action if they had complaints. Firstly, these students generally assumed that 'the less trouble, the better' is a typical attitude towards dissatisfaction. These students believed that confrontation might cause extra problems as Gao provided a representative answer:

We are not happy with the number of classes. However, because Chinese people are relatively introverted when things happen, it's our national character to choose to put up with it and not make a fuss. Unless it is something that really touches your bottom line. Otherwise, we think, oh, okay, that's it. (Gao/M/Languages)

In a situation with a lack of support or a diverse environment, most students take no action apart from venting to each other. For example, Guan's teacher did not show up to class but played a pre-recorded video with students. Guan (F/Education) and her Chinese classmates were not happy about it, but as she said, "people just talk about it, there are no actions".

Secondly, educational background is considered as the second reason. As Chapter 5 described, teachers in China enjoy relatively high social status and respect, and students tend to avoid confronting them. Therefore, the same mentality is applied to the British context, Yan illustrated:

For the majority, I don't think actions will take place. My undergraduate was a teacher's training college, and everyone was very disciplined, not much different from high school. That is to say, if you had problems with the teacher in class, most people wouldn't complain. So, when you grow up in this kind of environment and go to the UK, you will

probably deal with problems with your teachers in the same way. (Yan/M/Physical Sciences)

Thirdly, faith in change remains low among these students, especially when students lack a sense of belonging and lack of knowledge. Students like Xu and Jiang believe that international students' opinions are not treated seriously. Jiang was unhappy with his course setting, which is discussion-based rather than teaching hard skills and knowledge. However, he did not react as he felt he was not entitled to make demand for changes.

The only thing we are given is that we might be allowed to exercise our learning ability. I wish for more detailed explanations and specialisation. However, there is not much effect if I reflect my desire. (Jiang/M/Engineering)

Furthermore, the postgraduate taught programme only lasts for a year. Chapter 5 revealed interviewees struggled with the academic setting at the start and focused on the adjustment and transition. Without knowledge about the complaint channel, it would be hard to take action.

Students such as Liang and Wang reflected that they spent most of the first term familiarising themselves with the new academic setting and requirements. During the adjustment, they perceived everything as 'it is what it is'. It was hard to question rationality when they were learning something new. When they realised something is wrong, the second term was nearly finished.

In the survey, only 10.3% (n=87) agreed, while 65.8% (n=558) disagreed with the statement, "If I cannot get a good job after I graduate from my master's course, I should be able to have some of my tuition and fees refunded". Interviewees (n=29/51) considered it was their responsibility to find a good job as Fu (F/Education) argued that "It is students' responsibility to find their desirable jobs. A university is a platform to learn, not to train future workers".

In addition, interviewees expressed lack of confidence in terms of asking for refund when they were unhappy with their courses while they were in the universities, not to mention after graduation. Some students (n=20/51) complained their experience was affected negatively due to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The only way taken to address with the dissatisfactions was to sign a petition which was seen by a few interviewees. Wei shared her experience:

There was an international students petition to the Home Office to demand the tuition fee refund. However, it was not passed. There was no sign of tuition reduction either. (Wei/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

### **7.5.3 Good value of money and satisfaction**

When students in the interviews were asked how they measured the value of money and what made them most satisfied. There were four major aspects students referred to: the chance, dedication, social and culture capitals and personal transformation.

#### **7.5.3.1 The precious chance to learn and to experience**

The first element is the chance itself to study in the UK HEIs that make students satisfied and the sense of achieving good value for money. Newman (2014) describes that a university aims to be “free from necessary duties and cares, that students are in a condition for desiring to see, to hear and to learn” (p.79). Seven participants recognised the opportunity allowed them to search for the truth about themselves and to meet the hunger to see, to hear and to learn. As Lu illustrated:

The most valuable part is this opportunity that has offered me a lot. The chance not just offers me education but also a different life experience. The chance also gives me time to digest the past and update my thinking by getting new perspectives in a new place. (Lu/F/Education)

Fourteen students have worked before doing their master’s degrees. They had a strong desire for a chance to get back to academic life. Compared with their previous work, they expressed that a more joyful life free of obligation allows them to open their mind for a whole new world. Wei illustrated in more detail how the chance was so precious:

Six years in the same position has brought me to meet the career ceiling. I did not care about a degree. I have a bachelor’s and a master’s. I did not need another master’s degree but the chance to merge myself in a new environment with young classmates who love fashion. I want to be stimulated by the new energy and pick my own up. You worked six years and did what your boss told you. Your mind has been manipulated, and you slowly lose your own thinking. (Wei/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Chapter 4 revealed that 59% of students changed subject areas from undergraduate to postgraduate, and the chance to change the subject in China was much lower. Therefore, having an opportunity to study a subject that some participants longed for was a great satisfaction. A common argument with a marketised higher education sector is that students have an instrumental orientation towards their education and only invest in something that will benefit their future employment (Marginson, 2006; Molesworth et al, 2009; Muddiman, 2018). In market terms, numbers measure the success, and benefits should always be maximised. However, within higher education, students do not necessarily measure everything they achieve into specific numbers and the value of money is not only measured by the potential economic returns.

The findings of this study disagree with the argument as the majority of interviewees did value the learning opportunity and cared about what they learned. The results from the survey also do not align with current judgement of students only investing in a subject that will better their career prospects. Among 848 respondents, only 19.3% of participants agreed with “I will only major in something that will help me earn a lot of money”, while over 50% did not agree with the statement. And over 70% of respondents chose not to agree with the statement: “It is more important for me to have high-paying career than one I really like”. Eight interviewees changed their subject areas from Business & Administrative Studies to Social Studies. When asked why they changed subject areas, a common answer was that they could not major in something they disliked, especially if they had tried. They were glad they had the chance to correct the mistake. For example, Qin listened to her mum’s advice to study a business-related subject and got depressed because she put up with a subject without real interest for four years. She treated the opportunity as a life-saving chance. Hua studied a subject as a postgraduate in one university in the UK and continued to do a second postgraduate programme in his real interest at a different institution in the UK without any transition period. He felt great to have the opportunity to satisfy his interest.

It is so good to study politics after five years of studying Energy. However, if you want to do a second master’s, you must prepare and retake the PG entrance exam in China. It is likely you won’t get the chance. Here, you do it straightway. (Hua/M/Agriculture & Related Subjects and Social Studies)

The overall satisfaction toward the opportunity is highly positive regardless of whether the chance of studying in the UK brought some new life experience, new brain stimulation or lifesaving changes.

### 7.5.3.2 Dedication

When asked about whether students achieved good value for money and felt satisfied with their institutions and their studies, only one out of 51 interviewees made a minor complaint related to university facilities. Most interviewees were impressed by the campus resources, such as the library, academic skill centre and other facilities. Eight interviewees highlighted that their library was a great asset for their independent study and a key factor in their development. For example:

I was most pleased with the library where I could go for self-study. The space and learning atmosphere just made my study life so much more enjoyable. (Tong/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

With sufficient resources provided, interviewees (n=23/51) considered dedication to be the best way to achieve value for money. Being dedicated is highly prized by interview participants. The high tuition fees do not trigger ‘the demanding mentality’ but motivate them to work harder. For example, Pan (F/Architecture, Building & Planning) and Gu (F/Creative Arts and Design) were unlike most students, as their parents did not support them, and their funding solely came from their savings. Both reflected that earning money is not easy, which makes them appreciate the chance more and motivates them to put more effort into their studies. Similarly, some students supported by their families also recognised that their parent’s money was hard-earned. To appreciate the hard-earned money, they would dedicate more to study to make sure their parents’ money was not wasted. Wang illustrated:

Paying more motivates me to work harder to achieve better academic performance. The best value of money is dedicating as much as possible to make the most use of the resources that universities provided and get the degree and improve self. (Wang/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Participants generally considered it was their personal obligation to make the most of the resources. Seven interviewees claimed that they did not achieve good value of money due to lack of dedication. Jiang (M/Technology & Engineering) considered it was his fault for not being able to fully understand his teachers as he did not overcome the language barrier. Dai (F/Education) expressed regret for not joining any students’ societies so that she limited her own social life. Cao



(M/Education) simply blamed himself for being ‘too weak’ as he lost the enthusiasm of learning easily and was not dedicated enough.

### **7.5.3.3 Intercultural competence and social capital**

Intercultural competence equips a student with skills and attitudes to deal with the differences and learn to collaborate with different people in diverse environments at home or abroad. However, Cao & Meng (2020) stated that Chinese students considered intercultural networks daunting and challenging while they studied abroad. In this study, Chapter 5 also revealed that some interviewees struggled with building intercultural networks initially, but the skills were gradually developed with time, efforts and positive attitudes. Students who have achieved the cross-cultural skills believed it to be an ability highly appreciated by contemporary society. Jin emphasised the importance:

As globalisation becomes the most important, cross-cultural understanding will be very important when I graduate. You cannot enhance your intercultural competence by watching videos. You must be in an environment in which you have to interact ... I would say cross-cultural understanding is worth more than the knowledge from the classroom. (Jin/M/Engineering & Technology)

Some interviewees valued the intercultural competence as culture capital, which might be valuable for their employability. Wei was doing her second master’s when she was interviewed. Compared with her first experience, she appreciated intercultural competence the most. When asked if her hometown, Beijing and Hong Kong, where she achieved her undergraduate and first postgraduate degrees, which are two cosmopolitan cities with a multicultural environment, have provided her with the same level of diversity, she considered those two experiences did not exceed what London was offering.

Everyone in my class (in London) grows up in a different environment. Therefore, you must understand their thinking and how their backgrounds and cultures shape their thinking. Achieving intercultural competence is not easy but having that is beneficial...especially as I plan to work in London after graduation. (Wei/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Jiang considered that his university had done its best to provide him with a platform to meet students worldwide. Liu and Qu recognised the value of having Chinese students from all over China with different beliefs, values, and cultures. They also appreciated their Chinese peers as significant assets for enhancing their intercultural competence.

It is very satisfactory that my classmates are from different places, from China or other countries. It is very multicultural. Although I don't make any local friends, other international and Chinese students offer me many different perspectives and improve my communication. Being open and awareness of cross-culture will benefit future job prospects. (Jiang/M/Engineering & Technology)

Another element that students are satisfied with is that they achieve better social life and networks. While intercultural competence is emphasised through a diverse environment and peers from other countries, the quality of social network is regarded to have connections with other Chinese peers. Six participants were highly content with the friends or contacts they made. For example, Luo (M/Education) perceived that his Chinese classmates might have broader horizons than those without studying abroad experience. Tong (F/Business & Administrative Studies) shared her satisfaction with her better social life quality due to knowing the friends she made while she studied in the UK. Hua (M/Social Studies) bluntly pointed out that his classmates from his second master's would help him more in terms of work opportunities back in China. He explained that he also made friends from his first postgraduate programme, but the second institution is ranked 100 places higher than the first. Therefore, he implied that his connections at the higher-ranked university are of better quality than the lower-ranked one. Interestingly, four male students all highlighted the value of the quality of social networks related to their employability. These students felt satisfied knowing that they might benefit later from the connections they made, which indicates a desire of achieving more potential social capital has been fulfilled.

#### **7.5.3.4 Lifelong benefit: personal transformation**

Over 60% of survey respondents chose self-improvement as one of their top three reasons to study abroad. Twenty-one interviewees considered personal transformation as the most significant element that made them the most satisfied. They generally understood that improving themselves would have lifelong positive impacts and the transformative effects are intangible and take time to achieve. The personal transformation encompasses enhancement of their confidence, independence, tolerance, and resilience.

Seven participants were happy with ‘a more confident self’. Their confidence was enhanced through different aspects. From the academic perspective, Chapter 5 revealed that 90.0% of interview participants had a rough start with language challenges and adjusting to a new academic setting. However, when the interviews were conducted, 21 (out of 21 graduates) graduated successfully, and overcame these difficulties to achieve their degrees. These students recalled their experiences and had a high level of self-achievement. They appreciated the efforts they put into their studies and believed they were capable of stepping out of their comfort zone to achieved different things. Seven were doing PhDs when they were interviewed, and another five were in the process of PhD applications. Wang and Hua shared the same belief that their master’s studies made them realise that they were capable of studying. Hua failed his Gaokao, which defeated his faith in himself. However, he completed his first master’s degree and embarked on the second one to study a completely new subject that he is really interested in.

From non-academic perspectives, some students (n=5) felt they became more independent and tolerant and believed these characteristics are lifelong benefits. As these participants are the only child in their families, they grew up with lots of attention and care. Being physically far from home and social networks means they must look after themselves and face problems alone. The new and different spaces foster many of their life skills, such as cooking and maintaining a home. Their parents highly appreciated their independence. For example:

My parents finally think I’ve grown up after I became so much more independent.  
(Guan/F/Education)

Another significant personal transformation according to nine interviewees was being able to think differently and critically. In the survey, over 50% of participants disagreed and only 24.9% agreed with “Developing my critical thinking skills is only important if it helps me with my career”. Chapter 4 showed that some female students were anxious about their age, so a one-year programme was an important motive. However, with the actual experience in the UK, these students were much more relaxed with themselves and their lives. For example, Du illustrated how thinking differently changed her mindsets on her career and life choices:

I have become Zen. I have found that there are many possibilities. You can do whatever you want to try. I can wear anything as long as I am happy with the look. I can drink if I

want to. Life will not necessarily be wrong to work in a job without well-paid and high social status. (Du/F/Humanities)

In terms of lifelong benefits, Yang and Wang both graduated about a decade ago and believe that the personal transformation continues to shape who they are. Yang (M/Technology & Engineering) said that he wanted his daughter to have the same experience as the personal transformation was invaluable.

## 7.6 Chapter summary

Student-as-consumer discourse is enshrined in the Consumer Rights Act (2015). It has been applied to government institutions such as the Office of Students to guide its practice (Office for Students, 2022, 2023). The National Student Survey (NSS) gathers students' opinions on the quality of their courses and makes the results publicly available to 'inform prospective students' choices'. Compared with students who take their consumer status in the government policy for granted, and gradually turned to a social identity understood by home students and British society, the participants in this study do not have the same level of understanding and recognition. The qualitative findings show that about 71% of interviewees never encountered with the identity of consumer before participating in this study, so the initial reaction captured was one of unfamiliarity, confusion and ambivalence. However, paying tuition fees provoked students to agree with the consumer identity in financial terms. Compared with more strict domestic postgraduate entry exams and requirements, some students considered their increased chance of being admitted in the UK rather than in China might be associated with the consumer positioning. Meanwhile some interviewees rejected the positioning as they considered paying tuition fees was default and what they purchased was the opportunity, not the degree.

In terms of instrumentalism, both quantitative and qualitative studies found that the majority of students did not highly associate their learning with employment because the vocational motives violated what they view to be the purpose of university. Students who changed their subjects from undergraduate to postgraduate prioritised the interest of their subjects over employment. Regarding the intention of learning to maximise economic returns, only 9.9% (n=84) of the survey respondents agreed with the statement "If I cannot earn a lot of money after I graduate, I will have wasted my time at university in the UK", and 68.9% (n=584) disagreed. A main observation that students who managed to come to study in the UK did not necessarily have to be instrumental about economic return is that most Chinese students did not have financial burden or the urgent

economic needs. The comfortable financial position allows students to focus on their learning interests and their personal transformation. Students' desire for a prestigious credential was proved. Attending the prestigious universities was extremely difficult in China, while over 80% of students (n=689) successfully enrolled in the QS Top 200 world universities. The motivation of attending the prestigious and highly ranked universities is prioritised over career prospects.

Chinese students' sense of entitlement was relatively weak compared to what government policy offers. Students who are not positioning themselves as consumers have no concept of consumer rights. Students in this study are fully unaware of the HE regulator OfS and the complaint channel OIA. Most students remained rather naïve of what the consumer identity means to them and had no sense of entitlement. The non-action consumer complaint mode was taken by the majority of interviewees toward their dissatisfactions. The Chinese culture of avoiding confrontation and distance of power is considered as one reason. The trust in defending their rights was lower due to the lack of knowledge around how to complain, and the lack of confidence towards the UK government's protection to international students over its HE sector.

Against claims in existing literature that students evaluate their value of money based on employability and economic return, this study found firstly that students appreciated the chance to learn and to experience in the UK. Secondly, their own dedication toward their studies and making the most of the resources provided is also highly associated with good value for money and satisfaction. Thirdly, small part of students valued intercultural competence and social networks which are highly transferable to culture and social capitals. The most significant element is students' personal transformation, which they regard as a lifelong benefit. All in all, the findings lead to a question most Chinese students asked: "No way, how am I a consumer?".

## Chapter 8 Students' identities (re)constructions

### 8.1 Introduction

Research shows that the experience of studying in the UK has multiple impacts on international students' identities (re)constructions (e.g., Gu et al, 2010; Tarry, 2011; Zheng, 2022). Gu et al, (2010) considered that social and institutional culture play an important role on students' identity changes. Carénas (2006) argues that British higher education drives international students to reconstruct their identities while they are studying in the UK. The author used an analogy of a Russian doll to describe international students' complex and multi-layered identities (re)constructed within the new social and cultural context.

This chapter aims to unravel the Matryoshka doll by presenting Chinese students' perceptions of their identity (re)constructions, focusing on the five identities (international student, learner, academic partner, Chinese and foreigner) that they might have often encountered during the period of studying in the UK. Through drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, a better understanding of students' perspectives on the compatibility and conflict between these identities and the consumer identity is achieved. The chapter further studies Chinese students' preferences and rejection towards these positions portrayed by three other main HE stakeholders: UK government, HEIs and university teaching staff with extra attention focusing on the consumer identity.

### 8.2 International student

In the quantitative study, 34.7% of 848 participants chose 'international student' as the identity to best describe how they view themselves while they were studying in the UK and 2.2% preferred not to be identified as international student (see figure 8.2a and 8.2b). About a third of interviewees (n=19) held a neutral attitude towards 'international student', and a further third (n=16) chose not to be identified as one. These students against the identity due to their perception of its inequality. Sun (F/Languages) said: "I just think it is particularly unfair because we have to pay much more tuition fees. And I think the tuition fee is not just cover my cost but generate profit for university". For Kong (F/Education), being an international student means making more efforts towards everything. She said "apart from paying more fees, there are things required more outside the campus. For example, you have to pay a year rent upfront but local student can pay monthly".

Secondly, students who dislike the position considered it is not helpful for them to integrate into class and campus. Lu argued that:

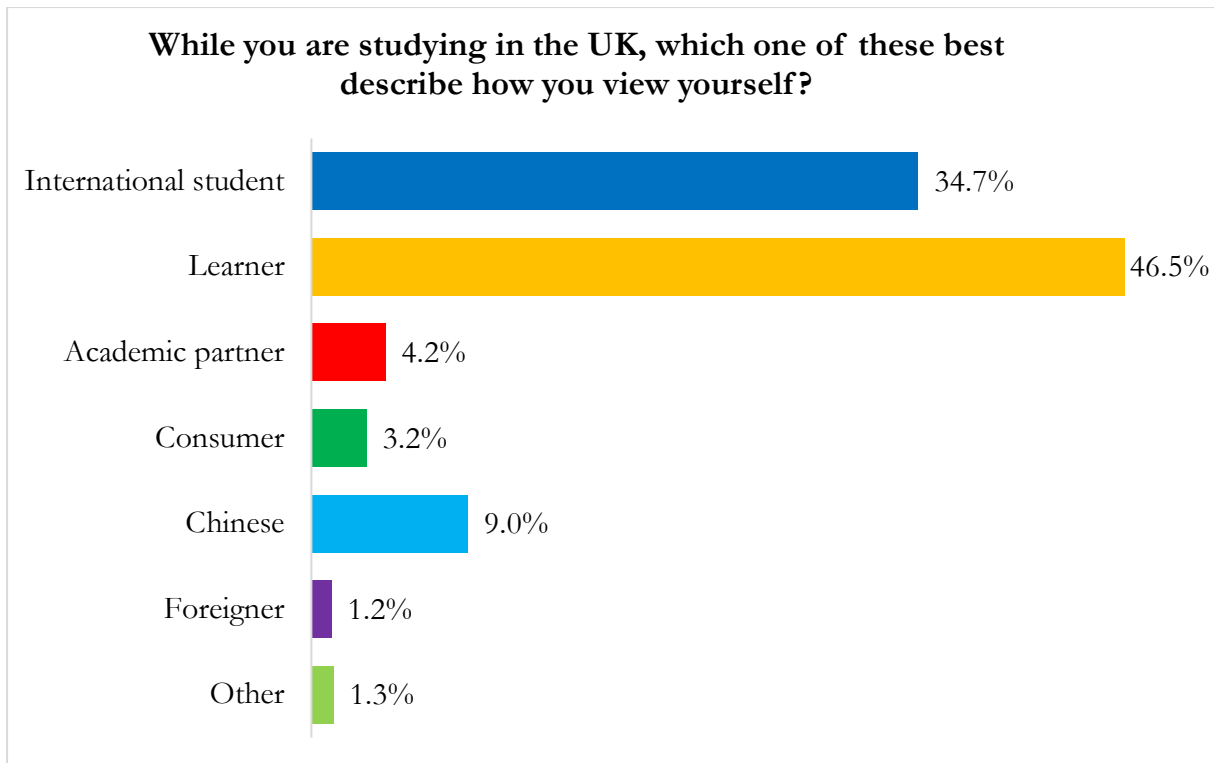
I think it as a very bad thing because it exacerbates the fact that international and local students do not integrate very well. The status puts me in a separate circle.  
(Lu/F/Education)

Thirdly, apart from being put in a “separate circle”, these students also considered it as a disempowering status. They argued the identity offer them no power but more obligations.

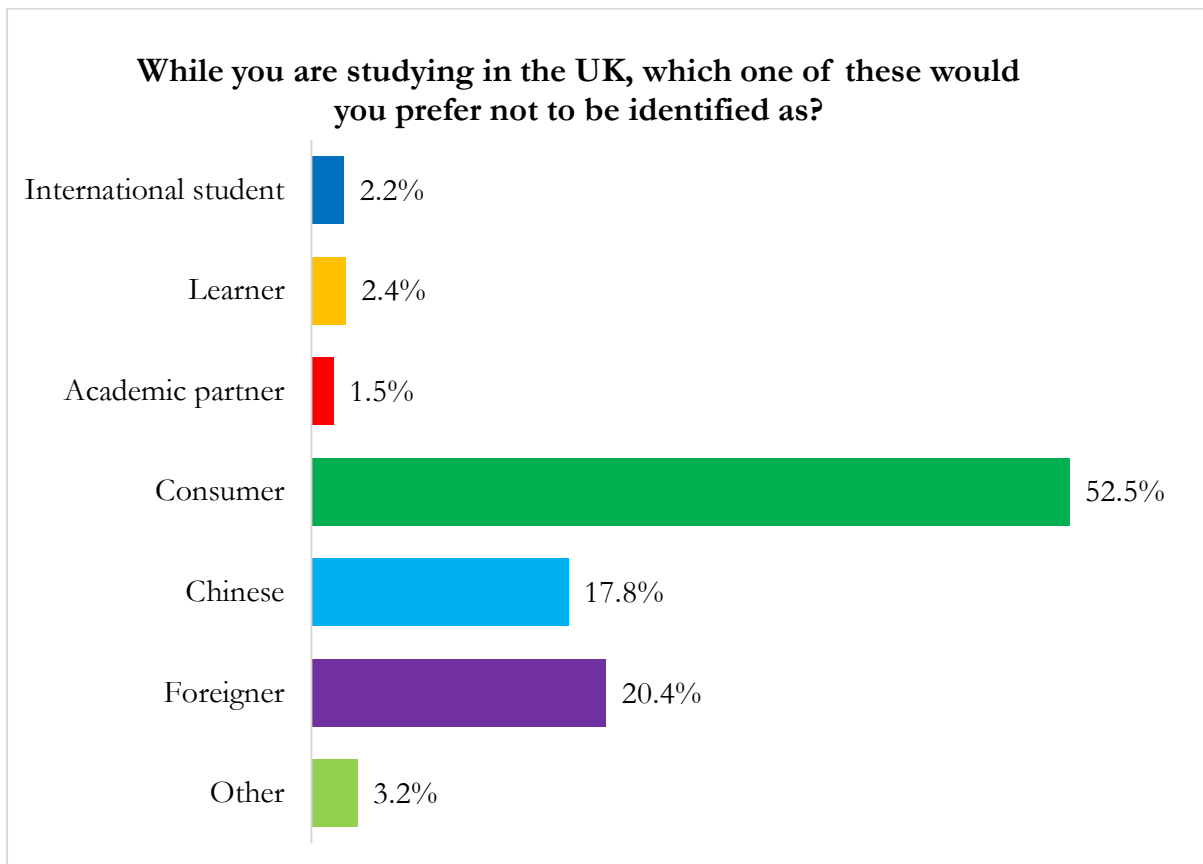
For example,

I think as an international student means you are study in another country which you are not familiar with the culture and the system. The status does not allow you to reason. You actually have no voice to reason. (Zhou/F/Education)

There were 16 interviewees (about 31% of interviewees) who chose to be identified as an international student. For them, it is a cosmopolitan position. “It also equals to a global citizen with open mind to me” Bao (M/Social Studies). Four of them recognised its temporary trait, which made them feel wherever the inequality the position might bring, it is just temporary. The benefits of the status were considered to outweigh the shortcomings.



*Figure 8.2a Survey result: Students' preferred identity*



*Figure 8.2b Survey result: Students' rejected identity*



### 8.3 Learner

People with a learning identity see themselves as learners, seek and engage life experiences with a learning attitude, and believe in their ability to learn (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p.5).

Brown (2017) suggests the construction of a learner identity includes a complex and psychological process of forming self-recognition, confidence and perception. Having a positive learner identity leads students to succeed in their higher education, especially for students who might not have enough cultural capital to transition to a different academic and social context (MacFarlane, 2018). MacFarlane suggests that forming a learner identity improves students' engagement and senses of belonging, which will have long-term benefits for students. The construction process is not linear and the learner identity is not a fixed thing, therefore its nature can be contradictory and impacted by pedagogic practices (Xu, 2021). Conceptualising a strong learner identity requires students to navigate multiple subject positions which are situated in different social and cultural contexts, and the agents to which they are interacted (Gilligan & Brady, 2022). Within the student consumerism literature, learner identity has been arguably replaced by consumer identity due to the marketisation of higher education (Brooks, 2022; Tomlinson, 2017).

As the figure 8.2a showed, 46.5% of 848 participants chose learner as their preferred identity. Learner was the most popular identity among six choices, highly contrasted with only 3.2% of participants choosing consumer. The identity of the learner was accepted and preferred by both survey and interview participants as the best identification and role to define them while they were studying in the UK. While 2.4% of survey participants chose not to be identified as a learner, none of the interviewees expressed negative comments or feelings at the interviews. Most interviewees (n=43) argued that their intention was study. Although Chapter 4 revealed various motivations for postgraduate study, abroad and in the UK, when facing the identity of learner, these interviewees strongly attached themselves to it.

There are three main reasons for this identification explained by the interviewees. Firstly, learner is chosen because students argued that it matched their main purpose the best. The identity best addresses their general desire to learn about themselves, new cultures, subjects, and academic settings and learn how to be more independent, confident, inclusive, and so on. The desire of learning to be better was common among all the interviews. The expectations of learning outcomes are that changes occur in worldview, in self, and in behaviour. The study experience is looked

forward to for transformative, emotional, and social learning to occur. Secondly, Learner is considered as an inclusive identity. For example, Lu explained her choice:

I think the beauty of the identity is that it does not differentiate the race, nationality and how much you pay. We are all learners, and we have same goal which is to learn. (Lu/F/Education)

Thirdly, learner is an identity embedded in some interview participants' (n=13) lifelong plans. In this study, six participants had two masters, and seven were doing their PhD studies. One common perspective they shared was the intrinsic value of learning which would be lifelong. They embraced the identity with pride and excitement. Having a master's or higher degree was no longer their motivation. Instead, they choose a different or even the same subject because they are keen to update their knowledge and thinking. For example, Cai explained why she studied for her second master's in the UK.

I was studying for my first master's in China. As the length was three years and I had a flexible timescale in the second year, I decided to apply for a second master's in the UK. The main reason was that I wanted to enrich the postgraduate study. I have studied Law for five years based on the Chinese system, and I desired to learn how the Law was constructed in the UK (Cai/F/Combined).

### **8.3.1 The 'Chinese learner'**

Chinese students' learning in the UK HEIs has been well documented over the last twenty years. Chinese learner is an identity associated with students coming from China, mainly from mainland China, which has received a lot of academic attention. Chinese students might have a relatively long history associated with an exam-oriented self, which a decisive subject position is identified as 'Chinese learners' (Wang, 2020). The identity is situated most in Western classrooms, which is commonly perceived as a deficit position. The characteristics of a 'Chinese learner' include being obedient, passive, lacking of critical thinking and conducting surface learning (Clark & Gieve, 2006). The first-degree attainment levels of Chinese graduates remain lower than those of domestic and other international students (Iannelli & Huang, 2014). Zhu & O'Sullivan (2020) note lecturers who instruct in highly participatory environments can be challenged by some Chinese students' silent behaviours. Xiao (2021) argued that Chinese students are considered as "passive learners" because they are in the Western-dominant ideology of student engagement (Xiao, 2021). Gu &

Maley, 2008 considered that most of Chinese students would survive from the demands of western learning and living environment, even with various intercultural challenges and struggles.

Chinese students are the largest source of international education mobility, and some institutions have a dominant proportion of Chinese students. Yu & Moskal (2018) state that Chinese students are overrepresented in business schools, and they face obstacles in establishing intercultural contacts both around the university and in the wider society of their host country, which means that a lack of diversity may result in unequal opportunities for cross-cultural communication. On the contrary, Ross & Chen (2015) argue that there are multiple positive impacts of Chinese communities on the campus. Their results indicate that Chinese student communities are in no way near 'passive' and segregated according to American institutional and media coverage. Instead, the Chinese student communities actively share information and offer social space and support to the members. The benefits and positive impacts do not just remain among students but feed right back into their host institutions. The authors argue that university administrators, faculty and peers should not overlook the fact that Chinese students are active creators and participants of campus cultures.

In regard to an overwhelming focus on the negative sides of 'Chinese learners', researchers (e.g., Ding, 2016; Fox, 2016; Wu, 2015) urged cautions should be applied when the identity is generalised to reinforce stereotypes and deficit learning positions of Chinese students. The students' agency are developing and shifting overtime and their positive adaptation strategies with a wide range of sharable linguistic, cultural and personal resources (Fox, 2016).

### **8.3.2 Chinese students' own perceptions of the 'Chinese learner'**

Chinese students in this study were also invited to give opinions on the "Chinese learner". Instead of offering the position with any pre-setting definitions or interpretations, interviewees were asked if they considered some common traits to exist among Chinese learners in the UK. There are four themes that emerged from interesting but intensive reflections from interviewees (n=51).

#### **8.3.2.1 Education culture and values**

Education is placed at the top of priority in contemporary Chinese society, from levels of government and society to those of families and individuals. The Chinese government place a high priority on people pursuing a better education and striving for a better life (Li & Xue, 2020). To achieve this aim, successive leaders have consistently placed education at the top of their strategic

priorities, as exemplified by ‘three priorities’: “economic and social development plan gives priority to education development”, “financial funds give priority to education investment”, “public resources give priority to meet the needs of education and human resources development” (Li & Xue, 2020, p. 38). The governments have continuously devoted significant resources to achieve a leap-forward growth of its higher education. A total of 37.79 million students enrolled in China’s universities at the end of 2018, with a gross enrolment rate of 45.7% (Li & Xue, 2020).

Aligning with the government ‘Education First’ guidance and strategy, families in China also prioritise education, especially under the 35 year (1980-2015) ‘One-Child’ policy. Families’ investment plans for their children were significantly altered by the policy (Fong 2002; Greenhalgh 2003), which changed from “large families invested little in each child or prioritised their resources in favour of sons rather than daughters, to small families that heavily invest in the only child” (Morgan & Wu, 2011, p.?).

Interviewees agreed with the education-first culture and background. As chapter 4 revealed, none of the interviewees were required to pay the cost back to their families and there were also not many expectations on economic return. One of the main reasons aligned with the education-first culture, is that regardless of cost, education is placed in the first and foremost position from macro to micro level in China. For example,

Study was always the priority in my family, at school and even in society. The whole high school was quite stressful, but the overall psychological pressure was a little bit easier because you just had to take care of your studies and the teachers and others would not do anything disruptive because they were worried about affecting your studies. I feel like high school is the period where you get the most attention, where you are taken care of in every way. (Kong/F/Education)

Apart from the current Chinese social and cultural influence on their learner identity, there were 12 interviewees who felt proud of their traditional education values. These participants considered that Chinese learners are influenced by Confucius’s philosophy. A common trait is repeatedly mentioned is being humble as there is always space for improvement, and learning from others is a good quality. A famous saying from Confucius’s 《Confucian Analects》 is that ‘三人行，必有我师焉；择其善者而从之，其不善而改之’. The direct translation is that ‘When I walk

along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. The better to follow, the bad to throw.’ It promotes being humble; as others always have strengths that deserve to learn, so it will be good to learn the best parts from others and reflect and amend the shortcomings that you do not want to have. Yang mentioned that “吾日三省吾身”, which was also from the Confucian Analects, meaning “I reflect and examine on myself three times every day to discover one’s own shortcomings and making up for one’s own deficiencies”. He said:

If everyone keeps bettering themselves, the team will also get stronger. It is (an) individual’s responsibility to better (them)self. Changes should start from individuals. Chinese students are consciously reflecting themselves and are keen to better themselves. It is like nature to us. (Yang/M/Engineering & Technology)

Interviewees almost felt offended when they were questioned about the relation of them with the identity. Some (n=13) insisted it was a nature which should not be questioned, or it was very unnecessary to justify their learning intention. These students were partly motivated to study abroad for having fun, but prioritised study and deal with academic demand first. Li illustrated:

The novelty of coming to the UK has not yet passed, and I still have the desire to have fun. But the PG only last a year. It was quite intensive. I had often watched recorded lectures until midnight. If I did not watch them, I could not understand the lectures the next day. Other things such as travelling and having fun were proved impossible. The Christmas holiday was for exams preparation and assignments. (Li/F/Engineering & Technology)

Li’s illustration presented Chinese students’ attitudes towards conflicts between desire of having fun and academic demand. The nature of studying first is interpreted on the opposite side of the consumer identity. Fundamentally, students in this study refused to accept the consumer identity. They rejected to accept their interpretation of being consumers meaning that their achievements such as degrees and personal improvement came from the tuition they paid instead of the effort and dedication they devoted to their studies.

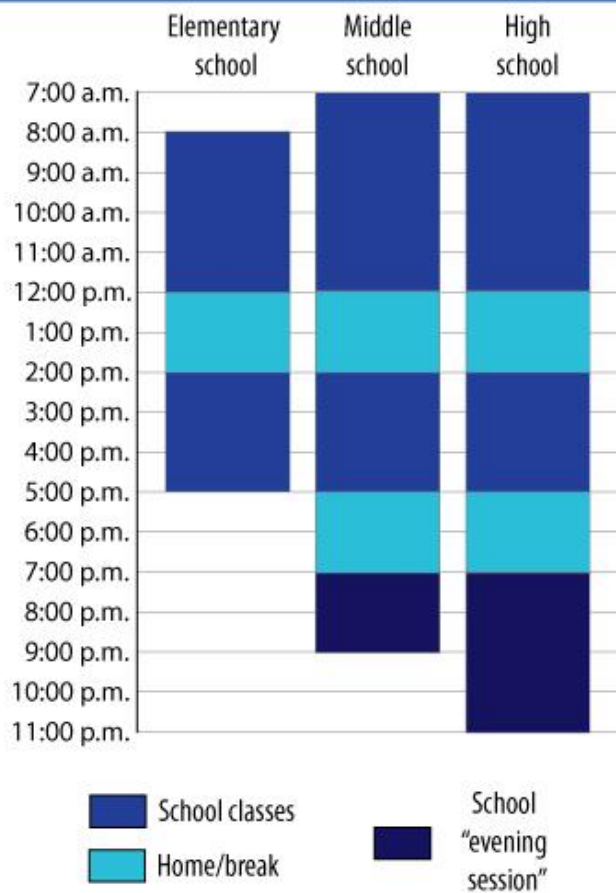
### **8.3.2.2 Growth mindset and grit**

Growth mindset and grit are considered as important qualities beyond intelligence, which can lead positive impacts on education (Zhao et al, 2018). Dweck (2012) states that growth mindset is a

concept believing a person is mostly malleable. A growth mindset tends to see abilities are something developable beyond the limitation of intelligence. Zhao et. (2018) applied the concepts to their research and found that growth mindset and grit both have positive impacts on students' learning motivations and academic performance. Teuber et al (2020) show although Chinese high school students (n=1527) faced high academic demands, which might cause higher risk of burnout. However, the grit prevented them from burnout and have the potential positive contribution to their academic performance.

Aligned with the argument of Teuber et al, (2020) that Chinese culture values grit, effort and high academic goals importantly, interviewees believed that these three characters are Chinese learners' attributes. During the first stage of interviews, all the interviewees (n=51) shared their educational background and experiences from high school to postgraduate level. A common trait emerged for their high school experience was facing enormous academic demands and an extensive study schedule (see an example figure 8.3.2.2). They all experienced Gaokao and successfully survived or thrived from one of the most intensive examinations in the world. About two third of interviewees considered growth mindset and grit were powerfully to facilitate their success. About one third of interviewees were not happy with their Gaokao results but not of them related intelligence to their 'failure'. They considered lack of sufficient diligence and grit failed them.

## A day in a typical Chinese student's life



Source: Yao Zhang, co-founder of Minds Abroad

**Figure 8.3.2.2** An example of a typical school day for Chinese students

With these attributes, interviewees had high levels of confidence towards their postgraduate education, especially at the initial stage. Students who changed their subject areas were asked if they feared the academic demands from a new subject area. Their determination of growth mindset offered them the confidence that they were capable of tackling any difficulties. For example,

I was rejected by American universities because their management major did not accept students with languages backgrounds. However, I thought that I could do it somewhere else, and once I had the opportunity, I would make it work. And I did it and I continued to complete a PhD in the field and became a lecturer teaching in a subject area which initially rejected me. (Wang/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Similar to Wang, the belief of growth mindset and the desire of learn to be better with perseverant grit made these Chinese learners strongly believed their chance for life-long accomplishment. They did not have any limitation on what they can do and what they cannot do. They believed that they could continue to apply the same mentality towards their high academic demand of PG education and maintain the same study lifestyle while they were in the UK.

Some interviewees (n=6) also highlighted the connection between grit and English language learning. They considered Chinese learners have strong grit which led to so many of them master a completely different language coming from different language family.

I think most Chinese students are being too humble. I sometimes convince myself that I am doing two degrees. One of them is the degree of English. Every Chinese learner knows how much efforts and passions required to master the language. We are gritty so that so many of us are here doing degrees in English. (Tong/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

### **8.3.2.3 The positive and negative influences of ‘baotuan’**

‘Baotuan’ (抱团) is from the Chinese idiom ‘bao tuan qu ruan’ (抱团取暖) the original meaning is to huddling as a group for warmth in harsh winter seasons. The phrase has gradually become a metaphor commonly used for expressing mutual assistance and cooperation, and the accumulation of strength to increase confidence and overcome the most difficult period. The phrase was used by 37 interviewees when discussed their perceptions of ‘Chinese learner’. First of all, ‘Baotuan’ was perceived as a collective community culture in the context of students studying overseas. It was argued as a social inclusion to help them settle in better and quicker. Zheng (2022) found that Chinese students often turn to their Chinese peers for seeking emotional support when managing intercultural stress and adjustment. For example, Lu illustrated:

It is a natural reaction. You feel more attached and comfortable to being Chinese abroad. I can’t say immediately that I won’t talk to my Chinese classmates from today onwards as soon as I arrive in the UK. I think it’s a forced behaviour. It should also depend on the dynamic of other students. If they have no interest to make friends with me. I won’t force myself and them. (Lu/F/Education)

There were 18 interviewees who explained Chinese student’s study overseas are more likely to exhibit ‘baotuan’ learning. Wu (2015) argues that group learning is one of the traditional learning



techniques used by Chinese students, but the criteria for successful learning groups are completely different from those applied in British universities. Group work under Chinese learning conventions often resolves itself into an approach where the academically strong team member(s) lead and do most of the work. Li illustrated:

Chinese learners who were being quiet did not mean that they did not actively engage with their studies. The students who actively engaged in lectures often got lots of questions from the quiet students after classes. Within a group, learning from the students with better academic performance is very common within Chinese learners. The stronger members are also very willing to share their knowledge and help others. (Li/F/Engineering & Technology)

Dai explained that she enjoyed her study partly because she belonged to a small study group which shared knowledge and skills they learned from class.

We used Chinese to discuss and debate which was much more effective than being 'stammer' in the classes. For example, we divided a long reading list among the group members and met together to share the reading comprehension. 'Baotuan' learning was much better than studying alone sometime. (Dai/F/Education)

While the strengths of being collective and collaborative were highlighted, some interviewees (n=17) perceived 'baotuan' negatively. It was used to refer to the phenomenon of Chinese students sticking together as a group inside and outside of the classroom. The participants recognised the behaviour impacted their academic and social life negatively. As the phenomenon was commonly seen on the campus, students who chose not to 'baotuan' felt under pressure of not fitting in. For example, Wang and Kong were judged as 'chong yang mei wai' (崇洋媚外), meaning blind worship of foreign goods and ideas, when they tried to break the same social circle. Wang explained her discontent:

Chinese students tend to 'baotuan' badly, which means you have the same social life. If you don't break the circle, you have no chance to have a real studying abroad experience. When I tried my best not to be 'baotuan' and made foreign friends, my Chinese fellows considered that I was 'chong yang mei wai' 崇洋媚外. (Wang/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Several interviewees (n=8) expressed discomfort when the forms of ‘bao tuan learning’ or ‘after class group seminar’ were brought into the classroom. The narrators felt frustrated that their peers continued to use Chinese to discuss in group works. For example,

My experience with group work was not positive. All the team members were Chinese, and all the discussions were in Chinese. There was a member who refused to talk in English. There was not much I could do with the situation. (Hua/F/Social Studies)

The narratives of Wang and Hua represented concerns of 17 interviewees. They felt the trait of ‘baotuan’ would not contribute to achieve their desire of making social connectedness and intercultural development. The motivation of improving English in an authentic environment also was easily demolished when they were the lack of chances to apply English into practice caused students to further lack understanding of the culture.

A practical factor brought up by students who study within subject areas dominated by Chinese students. Twelve interviewees came from Engineering & Technology and Business & Administrative Studies and reported over 90% of their classmates were Chinese. ‘Baotuan’ became inevitable, and these students admitted that they could only speak English when they talked to their teachers in private meetings. The English environment was much worse than they predicted.

#### **8.3.2.4 Compromise and accommodation of ‘Chinese learners’**

The recognition of ‘a rough start’ 90% of participants had been through made them concerned that if over 90% of classmates are Chinese students, then academic standards, student-teacher relationship, and the degree’s value will be compromised. Seventeen students expressed their dissatisfaction related to the lectures dominated with Chinese students. These interviewees’ perceptions of “Chinese learner” are more aligned with the current literature portraying the identity negatively. Qu shared her experience and concerns:

So many Chinese students are not willing to participate, for local students who need to host the whole room by themselves; for the teacher, sometimes the seminar is silent. The online teaching is worse as everyone turns off the camera, and do not interact. The course content must compromise. Understanding the students who have different learning culture

and challenges to adjust also means teachers try hard to accommodate. (Qu/F/Business & Administrative studies)

Among these 17 interviewees, ten negative narratives centred around “disengaged and instrumental Chinese learners”. Concerns that the negative side of the identity will further reinforce the stereotype about Chinese learners were raised. They were worried that teachers would treat all Chinese students as a homogenous group and lacked the motivation to be attentive and approachable. For example,

It makes me worry about whether the quality of the teachers and teaching will be lowered because there are too many Chinese students. Teachers might experience different group of Chinese students each year with same cultural shocks, language difficulties etc and give up the original standards and quality. I remember in seminar I sat in a table with majority of home students, they tried to skip me when we discussed. I felt teachers reacted the same. I had to prove that I was willing to participate and could talk good English. They got used to me after a while. (Xie/F/Creative & Art Design)

#### **8.4 Academic partner**

According to figure 8.2a, only 4.2% of survey respondents chose ‘academic partner’ to identify themselves while studying in the UK. Similarly, only 19.6% of respondents disagreed with ‘for the most part, postgraduate education is something I receive, not something I created’. The respondents did not associate themselves with the identity of an academic partner. The survey result shows that most participants did not recognise their responsibility of co-creating their PG education.

The interview data provides more explanations. Firstly, the main reason why only six interviewees recognised their capability of being academic partners was most interviewees’ (n=45) definition and interpretation of the identity is different from what literature stated. Most interviewees considered the identity requires high standard knowledge and expertise. They struggled with the position of being co-creators of a lecture. They lacked awareness of themselves being the co-producers when they participated in the seminars sharing their perspectives and making contributions.

As discussed before, nearly half of the survey participants chose to be learners and another half chose to be international students, which highlighted participants' learning mentality rather than creating mentality. The idea of co-creating a lecture content or curriculum remained new and daunting to students also because their teachers did not share the expectations of students being academic partners. Their previous mindset of 'zun shi zhong dao' (尊师重道: honouring teachers and respecting their expertise). The term has been a good tradition with a thousand years of history in China. The difference of learning culture, beliefs and values might prevent them from being active to partner with their teachers. Aligned with previously mentioned literature, students reacted with sceptical, scary and confused attitudes towards the identity. For example, Bai claimed that 'I am most uncomfortable with the status of academic partner. I did not feel we (teachers and I) had any concept of collaboration' (Bai/F/Creative Arts & Design).

Another strong argument is that the academic partnership remains among students, not with teachers. The hierarchy of student-teacher relationships in their undergraduate education prevents some students from positioning themselves as equal to their teachers. The teachers' ideas and teaching content are authoritative, and students choose not to criticise or change. Participants consider it hard to position teachers as partners in the postgraduate course with a historical mindset of respecting teachers' authority and expertise.

I didn't tick the academic partners in your survey yesterday, but actually after talking to you today, I think there might be a collaborative relationship between my classmates and I, but there seems to be no collaborative relationship with the teachers. (Wei/F/Business and administrative studies)

There were six interviewees who considered themselves academic partners. They felt confident that they had also contributed their knowledge and information to the class. They are not scared to address themselves as academic partners because they do not assume or expect that teachers know better or more than them, as most other participants do. For example, Gao explained:

My teachers don't really emphasise that they are the teachers, and we are the students. We are actually a two-way learning process in our classes, including our day-to-day communication, so we are like academic partners. (Gao/M/Languages)

## 8.5 Chinese and foreigner

Cao & Meng (2019) argue that international students will have better adaptation in social and academic aspects and improvement on their language proficiency from social connectedness offered by host society. Chapter 4 revealed that a significant motive for Chinese students to prefer to study abroad was to experience a different life within a different social and culture context. However, the reality reported by interviewees showed disappointment due to the lack of social connectedness. The intercultural transition and development of Chinese students largely remained as one-way observation and learning.

Figure 8.2b shows that 17.8% refused to be identified as Chinese and 20% rejected the identity of foreigner. Two thirds of interviewees (n=34) considered the identities of Chinese, and foreigner might contribute to social alienation. The difficulties in making connections with the home students and the wider society were obvious among interviews. There were 29 interviewees who considered that Chinese is supposed to be a neutral ethnic term, but somehow is more negatively perceived. Li explained that

Chinese students have made a great contribution to the school and giving money is a positive influence, but the number of people who hate Chinese people has also increased.  
(Li/F/Engineering & Technology)

'Hate Chinese' was repeatedly used for five interviewees, when they were promoted to offer evidence and reasons, Guan stated that

Chinese students were attacked with a hammer or a bottle on the heads on the street. It scared me so much that I was scared to go out at night and had to carry an alarm to school. It is hard to convince me that Chinese are not hated when the targets were all Chinese.  
(Guan/F/Education)

Interviewees did internalise the negative perceptions of being Chinese, which further prevented them from social integration outside of the campus. The current literature points out the limitation of social interaction between Chinese students and the wider society which was often regarded as a problem or a challenge (e.g., Christidis, 2021; Gu & Maley, 2008; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Although some positive social interactions do occur but limited to support from volunteers or religious groups. For example, Li (2011) explores the influence of local volunteer group's support

on Chinese students' cultural and linguistic experiences. As most volunteers were Christians, so Chinese students' religious beliefs and identities were also influenced. Yu & Stoet (2019) states that Christian churches in the UK contributed international students' social care and provided active cross-cultural interaction and communication for a large number of Chinese students while they were studying in the UK.

Foreigner is an identity most interviewees internalised. They recognised the fact they were foreigner to the UK and the locals. Among the interviews, 19 interviewees addressed non-Chinese as foreigners. I asked them what they thought and how did they feel about the term used by others to describe them. Most of these interviewees explained that the term was used naturally without any extra negative meaning. However, these students internalised the 'them'/foreigners and 'us'/Chinese, when they reflected their feelings when others used the term. For example,

It is pretty common to be addressed as foreign students. It seems the term placed me into a different circle, which means some stuff they know but would be unknown to me. For example, we talked about consumer rights, which might be something local students know but we don't because we are foreigners, and in our country, we don't use the term student-consumer. (Wan/F/Business & Administrative Studies)

Some students reflected their experience related to more negative aspects of both identities. However, they tended to think it is hard to distinguish the negative experience caused by them as Chinese or as foreigners. For instance, Gao described his experience at a local supermarket:

At the till, I was queuing behind a local person (I assume so, as he is white). The cashier chatted to him cheerfully and gave him a big thank you when he left. However, the big smile faded away immediately when it was my turn. I was served with a cold and silent face. At that point, I thought it must be because I was a foreigner or Chinese that annoyed her. (Gao/M/Languages)

When students described their experience similarly to Gao, especially during pandemic and post-Brexit, the overall impression I got was these students in a vulnerable or resigned position. These two identities are perceived as barriers preventing them from being 'rational' or 'demanding' consumers.

## **8.6 Students' perceptions of how other HE stakeholders define them**

Social identity theory suggests individuals occupy different identities when associated with different groups or social actors. The current literature on student-consumer identity rarely considers that students' opinions on consumer identity might vary when facing different HE stakeholders, such as the UK government, universities, and teaching staff. The interactions between students and the three stakeholders might not be the same. Therefore, allowing participants to define their relationships with these stakeholders is vital. Their reflections on different engagements with others enable them to justify their preferences or rejections towards being identified as consumers by the three different groups.

In order to understand students' perceptions of the new identity of a consumer within the context of marketisation, other common social identities, such as a learner and academic partner, are explored so that participants can assess and evaluate the extent to which they associate themselves with consumer identity. Exploring multiple identities enables discovering the tensions among these identities and the relationships students hold with other HE stakeholders. For example, there is a clear tension and conflict between a consumer who might expect a degree with minimum effort as the return of their tuition fees and a traditional student role as a learner who accepts to be intellectually challenged with passion on the subject and determination of deep learning.

Although Section 2.7 points out that individuals' identities are multiple and fluid, individuals identify with a certain identity when facing a particular group. Therefore, individuals are forced to apply different coping strategies when identity conflict occurs. They try to use one or the other to ensure that an identity fits a particular context (Kulich et al, 2017). This section aims to provide the findings on how students view other HE stakeholders and define them. The reason is that students do not see the UK government, universities and teaching staff as the same entity. They define their relationships with each other differently. They also perceived being identified differently. The quantitative and qualitative results both prove most participants prefer an identity to describe their relationship with the other HE stakeholders and believe that they are identified with the fittest identity.

### **8.6.1 UK government**

In the survey, 848 respondents were asked how they perceived the UK government identified them while they were studying in the UK. Figure 8.6 shows that 48.2% of the respondents saw the UK government defining them as international students, while 21.9% chose consumers, and 14.7% considered they were seen as learners. The interviewees explained their choices why they chose 'international student'. An international student is an identification that distinguishes non-UK students from other countries, which will be treated differently in terms of policy, benefits and obligations. Elaborating the point of differentiation between UK and non-UK students, Zhou explained her dilemma between choosing international students and consumers. She said that

The fact is the international students are the real consumers to the UK government, to its HE sector and local businesses. However, the UK government does not want to treat international students as consumers as they will not protect international students' consumer rights and benefits. (Zhou/F/Education)

Within Zhou's understanding and interpretation of the two identifications, she sensed that the UK government encouraged the UK students to be consumers so that they can demand rights and value of money from universities, which is protected and backed up by the government. 'Foreigner' was used to justify the behaviour and inequality. However, seeing non-UK students just as international students means emphasising the difference in terms of paying more tuition fees, no citizen rights and benefits in the meantime reducing its obligation to offer them protections and rights. This is illustrated by Xiong:

I think the UK government treats us as consumers to support the economy. The consumer identity justified the realistic consideration of the government. However, I had complaints in my heart, but I had to accept them because there is no redress scheme for the dissatisfaction. (Xiong/F/Education)



While you are studying in the UK, which one of these best describe how the UK government, universities and teachers define you as?

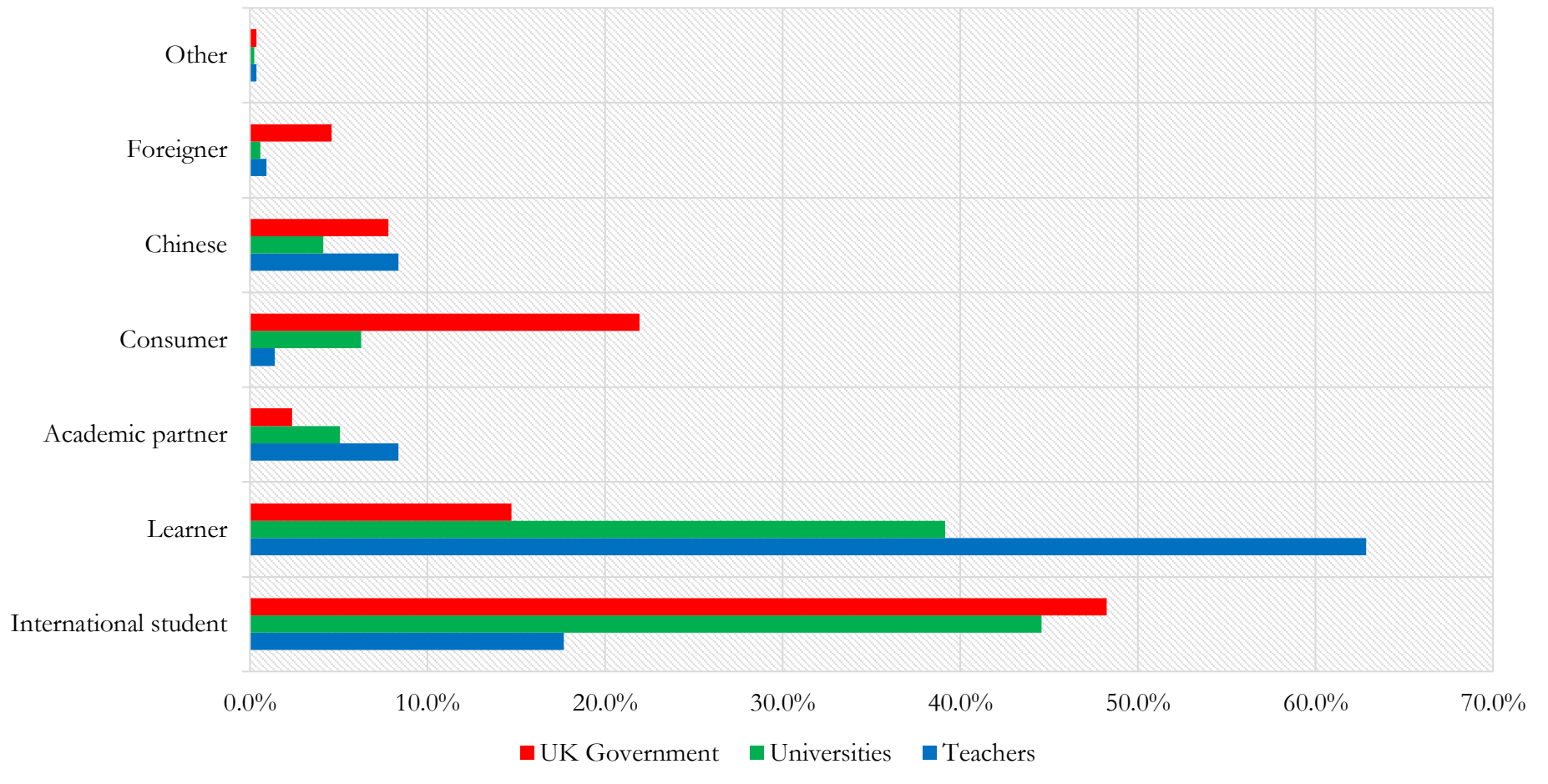


Figure 8.6 Survey result: identified by UK government, university and teacher

When prompted for more information about dissatisfaction and what she wanted to address to the government, she further explained that:

For example, the tuition fee is very unreasonable. I think a reasonable price should be halved or reduced to a third of the current amount. However, there is no way to negotiate the price but accept it. (Xiong/F/Education)

Having the recognition of the role the UK government plays within the marketisation of universities, students are more likely to accept the fact that they are identified as consumers, which proved by a significantly higher percentage as figure 8.6 showed. For example, Hua illustrated that 'Education is a product of the UK government, so it is acceptable for them to define me as a consumer'. (Hua/Agricultural & related subjects/social studies). There is another reason why students are more acceptable to be seen as consumers. The government decides the students' entry rights by issuing or rejecting students' visa applications. The financial proof is an essential part of the Home Office's consideration. Therefore, Ma argued that the UK government chose students who have genuine financial capability to afford its HE.

The demand of financial capability means that you have to become a consumer first to be able to become an international student, or learner or other identities. The consumer identity is justified and fair when they are not only the consumers of the local economy but also its HE sector. (Ma/F/Languages)

Only 0.4% of surveyed students chose to fill in other identities, the majority of the answers are economic related such as 'an economic contributor' and 'an ATM'. The economic motive was not opposed by Gao who supported the same strategy if China did the same.

It is understandable if the Chinese government develops its HE sector as an export industry to generate revenue to benefit the sector and the national economy. (Gao/M/Education)

There is a higher understanding of the relationship between the UK government and international students similar to trader and customer, therefore, the acceptance of being identified as consumers is a lot higher than the other two stakeholders, university and teacher. For example,

The agent told me that education is an industry in the UK, similar to the tourism and service industries. Because it is commercialised so that it was easier for me to apply to good universities. I think I felt I was a consumer to the UK government before I came. (Fu/F/Education)

### 8.6.2 Universities

In the survey, 44.6% of participants considered university identified them as international students, which is similar with the percentage of the UK government identifying them as (48.2%). However, the percentage of ‘learners’ almost tripled and that of ‘consumers’ decreased to one third. Similarly, students who chose ‘international students’ considering the different tuition fees, students associated university with more administrative, which provides them resources and facilities. However, it is far much less acceptable if institutions identified students as consumers. Wang and Jiang expected their institutions to have social responsibility and should be a public good. Both of them argued a similar point:

Universities should have social responsibility with a more humanistic spirit, which not only cares about society but also achieves the purpose of cultivating the nation and delivering knowledge to different people regardless of their background and financial status. (Wang/F/Business & Administrative)

Yang compared the ‘business-like’ behaviours between government and universities, he considered that government is more business-like towards international students. He explained:

When students ran out of money due to the extra cost of the Covid pandemic, Australia’s prime minister asked students who had financial difficulties to leave the country, but universities disagreed with the behaviour which showed the government certainly acted more business-like than the universities. (Yang/M/Engineering & Technology)

There were 38 interviewees who expressed different levels of disagreement with universities acting too “business-like” and they expressed their intention to relate themselves with universities in regard of teaching and learning instead of doing business. These students simply considered universities should not identify them as consumers because of the approach against their learning

intention. They also feared that universities treat students as consumers meaning universities just care about revenue not teaching. Liang stated that:

I think, look, from a student's point of view, you definitely don't want the university to treat you as a 'consumer'. After all, your main purpose is probably to learn, so I hope it will treat you as a student, and then like a teacher, really teach you something, you can really learn something. (Liang/F/Education)

The fact that education is deregulated and completely marketised scares me. The essence of education will be lost. I am ambivalent about whether university places me in the consumer position. I want us to enjoy consumer rights and have the opportunity to counteract the school doing badly, but I don't want the school to treat me in a very business-like manner. For example, once we graduated, our teachers never responded to our emails. I certainly understand that they have the right not to reply, but I feel upset about it. It is like business done. (Kong/F/Education)

Further to Liang and Kong's points, the interviewees came from Education subject areas or teaching background held stronger rejection with university treats students as consumers and act "business-like". They preferred not to measure education instrumentally. They want to maintain a trust and respectful relationship with their institutions. Respect and trust for universities were emphasised by over half interviewees, which means that institutions will lose these students' respect and trust easily when they are doing something beyond the conventional university business such as teaching and research. For example,

I don't like universities being too commercial. We know the fact that they want to make money from us. However, if they are only too keen on the money side of it, somehow, they lost my trust and respect. Like you will not really trust and respect a sale person who really keen on selling you stuff. (Pan/F/Architecture, Building & Planning)

When promoted what kind of behaviour counted as "too keen on the money side of it", Pan explained that she felt embarrassed when her university used Weibo to do live promotion and enrolment. She said: "the behaviour was dropping in price" (Pan/F/Architecture, Building & Planning).

### 8.6.3 University teaching staff

In the survey as the result shown in figure 8.6, 62.9% of survey participants considered 'learner' was the best identification for teachers to define them. The percentage of 'international students' dropped to 17.7%, while 'academic partner' and Chinese both increased to 8.4%. There was a significant decrease in 'consumer' with only 1.4%.

The learner identity was emphasised the most significantly when interviewees faced the choices of identifications and acceptance of how their teachers defined them as. Zero participants among the interviews (n=51) considered they can take the fact that teachers identified them as consumers. 'I can't take it' or 'It is not acceptable' were the common answers. They expressed their strong rejections of teachers who identified students as consumers emotionally, morally and financially. Firstly, students (n=11) such as Bao (M/Social Studies) simply considered that "it is impossible that my teachers treat us as consumers" and Gao (M/Languages) said: "if my teacher see us as a tool to make money, I would be very sad". They simply cannot accept it emotionally.

Secondly, students regard teachers with business-like behaviours as a serious unethical issue. they simply cannot accept the fact that the definition of teacher associates with commercial operation, especially with their educational background. Interviewees (n=33) repeatedly used unethical to describe when teachers acted business liked towards students and considered students as consumers. The social and cultural background might explain students' strongest rejection towards teachers' projection.

Chapter 5 has discussed how teachers enjoy relatively high social status and are positioned as authoritative knowledge distributors and moral examples for the society and students. Li & Xue (2020) stated that China has always had a tradition of respecting teachers and valuing education. In the promotion of teachers' status, the teacher honour system has always played an important role, which can convey recognition and recognition of teachers' work results, form a good social atmosphere, and play an incentive role in teachers' professional work. In 2014, the Ministry of Education in China issued regulations and measurements for solving teachers' unethical behaviours and protecting students' rights and interests (Li & Xue, 2020). Construction of teachers' ethics is to ensure teachers "must be moral, has the heart of love, take the lead in practice the socialist core values" (Li & Xue, 2020, p.78). In the meantime, teachers' honours are highly emphasised by Chinese government. Chinese president Xi emphasised that "that teachers are

engineers of the human soul and inheritors of human civilisation” (Li & Xue, 2020, p.79) in a speech at the National Education Congress in September 2018. Thus, Chinese government and society continued to promote the social practice of respecting teachers so that they enjoy the social prestige they deserve and make new and greater contributions to the cause of the Party and the people in their teaching and educating positions (Li & Xue, 2020).

With a long habit of respecting teachers due to their high moral standard and being selfless to dedicate their knowledge to the students with care, over half of interviewees weighted the title of teacher heavily. For example,

Teacher is a title we use since primary school. We expect them to teach us, in university’s case, we expect them to offer us their expertise. Within the academic atmosphere, teachers should be teaching orientated instead of selling the course or service. (Jiang/M/Engineering & Technology)

A significant point of Chinese education is that teachers are there to teach, preach and solve students’ problems. The relationship between teachers and students should never ever be as impure as monetary. (Ren/F/ Subjects Allied to Medicine)

The respect that teachers enjoy in China is underpinned by a strong trust and faith of teachers who will fulfil their obligations to teach and sincerely to wish students to be better and fulfil their potential. With the mutual understanding, students believe they do not need the ‘consumer cap’ to demand teaching quality from teachers.

Regardless how much we paid, even in China, we paid £300 per year, we can still make an evaluation of teaching quality. I feel it is teachers’ responsibility to offer good teaching. Otherwise, everyone can be a teacher. You get the title; you do good job. (Chu/M/Business & Administrative Studies)

Thirdly, there was a naivety that interviewees considered that the impacts of marketisation only stay at the macro level in the UK. Students tend to consider teachers can be just their teachers who dedicate their whole time and efforts on passing knowledge on them. There was very limited understanding of what other roles teachers might have to play within the UK HE sector, especially in a neoliberal context. The disconnections between students’ expectations of their teachers and

universities requirements of their teachers. Students simply cannot accept the ‘entrepreneurship’ factor that universities commonly require their academic staff to have. Students have wide recognition that universities have been marketised and international students’ recruitment has become a lucrative business. However, there is little knowledge about how the market mechanisms impacts on teaching and teachers. Students also have little knowledge about where their tuition fees go and assumed that their teaching absorbed the most significant proportion of their tuitions and that their teachers were well paid. Most interviewees assumed that the intention of their institutions generating revenue from them is providing them the best facilities and teaching quality. Therefore, as chapter 7 revealed that some interviewees chose to accommodate the marketisation and pay the substantial high tuition fees. The tolerance of being identified as consumers by the UK government was higher than universities. However, there was zero tolerance towards teachers identifying them as consumers financially. For example, Wei explained:

You (teachers) are paid with salary, and I assume it will be high as we have to pay so much, and I think it should be your obligation to deliver me the knowledge. I hope you do better than the university. I hope you will be more responsible than the university. If teachers act like university managers, who might just think to earn the money. Then it is more unacceptable. (Wei/F/Business and Administrative Studies)

Cao even provided a clear cut from teachers to the government and university managers.

Teachers at our school are working hard to pass on their knowledge to us even though we are just here for a year. And then everyone is doing what they are supposed to do. The marketisation is stay up at the macro level, which is set by the government, or by the university managers, but I think this is really not related to the teachers. Our teachers are really serious about giving us lessons, so I don’t think they see us as a consumer or a commodity. Since we are in the education department, the teachers know that we will be teachers of a lots of students, so they even work harder. (Gao/M/Education)

Students also believe that teachers’ monetary motive is low as Hua illustrated that:

There are two sides of it. On the one hand, teachers in British universities are kind of scholars, pure scholars or professors, I think they simply focuses on academic side and knowledge dissemination. Maybe they will not feel or say that you (students) spend money

to buy my knowledge. It is simply to be a teacher to teach and preach. On the other hand, I think if teachers teach from a profit point of view, then he/she probably can go to commercial institutions or industry to earn money, maybe the income is higher. The business side of thinking happens within classroom would make me a little disgusted, and certainly will not understand. (Hua/M/Agriculture and Related Subjects/Social Studies)

Some interviewees (n=7) such as Su (F/Engineering & Technology) failed to understand why teachers took strike action and absented from classes. It seems to them that their teachers might be 'greedy' for keep asking for more money when students have paid a substantial rate for each lecture according to their own calculation. However, some students (n=5) do sense their lessons to some degrees are converted to service because of the questionnaires they are required to fill in and students' representatives who represent them take part in all sorts of management meetings. Du had a more nuanced observation:

I cannot see my teachers as service providers, but their carefulness of students' satisfactions makes me feel it (the teaching) is like a service. ... I can sense they are pressured by students unhappy with them. (Du/F/Historical & Philosophical Studies)

Only two interviewees agreed with the phrase of service providers being related to their teachers. The rest of interviewees did not agree with the term. When asked if the rest of interviewees considered themselves being 'demanding' towards their teachers. A major theme emerged that interviewees did not consider themselves as demanding. If they were at some cases, they demanded as learners instead of consumers. For example,

I would like to have my teachers write some notes on the white board while they talked through the knowledge. Some other Chinese students reported the same need. I consider our behaviour stemmed from learning mentality instead of being demanding consumers because we paid. (Ren/F/Subject Allied to Medicine)

## 8.7 Chapter summary

This chapter reveals Chinese students' interactions and perspectives on some common identities related to them. The survey results showed that learner was the most popular identity students identified themselves as, while consumer is the identity over half of the survey participants preferred not to be identified as. Learner is an identity all the interviewees can relate themselves



and part of their intentions with. It is a position that makes them feel included and adequate. Compared with the position of being an international student, being a learner implies not having to think about the inequality, disempowerment, and concerted effort that the status of international student is conceived to confer. Learner is aligned with students' social and cultural belief and value. There is always space to be improved and they can always do better with grit and a growth mindset. Comparing with the identity of academic partner, learner might be more adequate to the students as they interpreted academic partner as a position with a high standard of knowledge and expertise, which belongs more to their teachers. Chinese and foreigner were internalised as negative positions at some contexts. The majority of interviewees did not want to stand out only because they are Chinese or foreigners within the context of studying in the UK.

In terms of being identified as the discussed identities by the three main HE stakeholders, Chinese students have different levels of accommodation, acceptance, and rejection. With the understanding of the motives of the UK government marketising its HE for developing economy and supporting its HE sector, Chinese students in both the survey and interviews showed the greatest acceptance that the UK government positions them as consumers. However, international student was the identity most survey students chose for what the UK government defined them as. The reasons were either to differentiate students from UK or non-UK based on rights and benefits or interviewees struggled to choose the identity of consumer as they did not hold a strong belief that the UK government would give them the consumers' rights. In the survey, similar percentages of students considered their universities either identified them as learner or international student. The interviewees' tolerance of their institutions being business-like decreased significantly compared to the UK government. They preferred that the relationship with their institutions remained within teaching and learning affairs instead of doing business. They also believed that the essence of education is about people's intercultural and personal growth. Therefore, university is a place that they hope to trust and respect. Learner identity was choosing the most (about 65%) for how teachers identified them, with a small percentage choosing consumer (about 2%). Interview results shows there was zero tolerance towards teachers identifying students as consumers. Interviewees could not accept being identified as consumers by their teachers emotionally, morally and financially. They simply considered teachers will and should not treat students as consumers. They argued that teachers are being unethical to turn teaching into business, which is against the essence of being teachers who should have high moral standards without too much commercial behaviours. Financially, interviewees considered the impacts of marketisation remained at the macro levels. Teaching with sufficient funding and teachers being

well-paid were assumed as the major intention of marketisation. Thus, interviewees considered teachers should and are able to focus on teaching and dedicate their time to support their studies without getting involved with marketisation.

## Chapter 9 Discussion and conclusion

### 9.1 Introduction

This study addresses debates on student-as-consumer identity and the construction of contemporary higher education students in light of the marketisation and consumerism of British higher education. Differing from current research's focus on the challenges brought by consumerist discourse at the levels of academic (e.g., Naidoo et al, 2011; Symonds, 2021) and management in higher education (e.g., Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2017; Lewis & Robertson, 2022), the study explores students' experience and perspectives on how the changing British higher education landscape impacts their identity construction, and how they perceive the consumerist discourse: 'student-consumer'. Although there is increasing attention on researching students' perceptions (e.g., Tomlinson, 2017; Reynolds, 2022), international students are largely excluded from the investigation within the context of UK higher education.

The influence of neoliberalism and the marketisation on students' everyday life is lack of scholar attention (Brooks, et al, 2021a). The thesis focuses on Chinese postgraduate students' experience and perspectives on the consumerist discourse: student-consumer and the marketisation of UK higher education. In doing so, a mixed method research approach was conducted by surveying 848 Chinese students across Britain and interviewing 51 respondents to answer the following main and sub research questions:

How do Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students perceive the identity of student-as-consumer in UK universities?

- a) What are their motivations and expectations (including those of their parents) from their studies in the UK?
- b) How do they approach their studies and interact with their teaching staff in the UK?
- c) How do they perceive the marketisation of UK higher education and the impacts of the market practice on their lives and studies?
- d) How do they (re)construct their identities within UK higher education and perceive their relationships with the UK government, their universities, and teaching staff?

The chapter first summarises the key findings presented in section 9.2. It then presents the implication of this study in general and to the level of policy and practice. Final point of the chapter acknowledges the limitation of the thesis and provides suggestion of future research.

## 9.2 Key findings summary

### 9.2.1 Chinese students' motivation and expectations

By unravelling students' four stages of the decision-making process, the findings reveal two significant internal motives that are often overlooked when students decide to do a postgraduate study: studying a subject with interest and extending the joy of studying as a student. Many factors influenced students' decision-making, and the process was intertwined and complex (e.g., Rudd et al, 2012; Wang & Crawford, 2020). There is a careful investigation of the reasons why Chinese students chose to do their postgraduate studies, why they preferred to study internationally instead of domestically, why they chose the UK as the destination and how they made decisions on their host institution. This reveals that Chinese students place intrinsic value of education in the stage of deciding to study at postgraduate level. According to the survey result, 59% of participants changed subject areas from undergraduate to postgraduate, 17% of them changed to Education, while only 1.2% shifted to Business & Administrative studies. The number of Social Studies doubled while that of STEM students halved. The interview results show a more nuanced explanation for the change. A striking answer is that studying a subject without interest proved to be a mistake. Students argued that they chose an undergraduate major without sufficient understanding and knowledge, which put them on the wrong path and made their studies unbearable. Often with their parents' help, some interviewees, especially female participants, demonstrated that they could not study a subject just for instrumental motivation without genuine interest. Therefore, by having a gap year between UG and PG or discovering their genuine interest in UG, the students who changed their subject area demonstrated they were confident that they made the right decision for their postgraduate studies. Personal development, especially intercultural competence, was another central element emphasised in the other three decision-making stages. Although considering economic return and career prospects was insignificant compared to the findings of UK students, some consumerist thinking was captured. According to the survey results, the one-year programme length was most often chosen to represent good value of money for postgraduate study, and university ranking and reputation were among the top reasons for students to choose their institution.

It is worth mentioning that some students chose the UK because of its more flexible admission. Current literature often interpreted it as students using their financial advantage to avoid the harsh domestic exam and intensive competition (e.g., Cheng, 2018; Li, 2013). However, these students

argued that they disagreed with the domestic postgraduate selection process, which is examination-centred and restricts change of subject area. They chose to study in the UK with more flexible admission, allowing them to protect their interest and avoid studying for instrumental reasons.

Regarding students' expectations, nearly 90% of survey participants received family funding support, and 48 interviewees expressed no financial burden from parents on their studies in the UK. Most interviewees showed significant financial confidence to study their subjects without worrying about employability and further economic return. The interviewees expressed no urgency in finding a job or achieving economic return after graduation. The privilege of studying and enjoying student life without committing to other social responsibilities further explains why students embarked on PG instead of choosing to do a job or quitting their jobs. Students claimed their parent's expectations heavily leaned on their health, safety and personal development, further explaining that the cohort might not be as strategic as most marketing literature emphasises, where a high expectation is placed on career prospects (e.g., Counsell, 2011; Rudd et al, 2012). Counsell (2011) suggests that Chinese students tend to find the UK, USA, Australia and Canada attractive as the degrees from these countries are perceived as better than Chinese degrees. In addition, the study shows that students consider their career prospects would be boosted significantly after living and working abroad for several years (ibid.) The survey and the interview results show that participants in this study do not hold the similar level of optimism towards the direct and positive correlation between their UK degrees and their career prospects starting from the motivation. In the survey, participants considered university location more important than employment prospects when choosing their institutions. The 'direct help with a career' was not the most preferred option when students considered the value for money of their PG course. Among the interviews, some students were pessimistic about their PG degrees, especially within the context of marketisation of UK higher education. While job-related motivation was less emphasised, both sets of data reveals that university prestige and ranking influence students most significant and the broader cultural and social offerings that the UK provide. This finding aligns with more recent research on Chinese students' motivation to study in the UK. For example, Wu (2014) suggests that Chinese students choosing MA programmes are motivated by more cultural related factors, while students choosing MSc programs are strongly driven by academic-related factors; and Cebolla-Boado et al (2018) find that university ranking, and prestige are the most driving incentives for Chinese students to study in the UK.

The investigation of students' motivation and expectation (including their parents') show that students do express some level of consumer orientation towards their PG education in the UK. However, it is not aligned with majority of student-consumerism argument that student-consumers' incentives of their HE highly associate with the economic return or career prospects (e.g., Bennett, 2021; Molesworth et al 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). For participants in this study, hunting for a distinctive education is like a nature for students with a long history of Chinese education, and going to a university with distinctive ranking position and prestige is a wish fulfilled. While Chinese students' decision-making process is beyond complex due to multiple factors intertwined into their final decision, the majority of them do appreciate the intrinsic value of their PG education in the UK, such as subject interest and personal development.

## **9.2.2 Perceptions of the marketisation of UK higher education**

While the neoliberal ideology and the market-logic permeating the UK higher education have stimulated considerable academic criticism (e.g., Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020) and the student-consumerism and the identity of students as consumers continue to attract critical commentary from the academic level (e.g., Bennett, 2011; Brown, 2015; Bunce et al, 2017), the impacts on students' experiences are less known. This section summarises the perceptions of Chinese international students on the marketisation of UK HE and the influence of that to their experiences in the UK.

### **9.2.2.1 The joint effort of the UK government and the university leaders**

The interview participants (n=45/51) shared a general understanding that the marketisation of UK HE means the UK government and the HE sector treat HE as an industry and are recruiting international students to generate revenues. Most of these students (n=34/51) did not separate the government and universities in terms of which party is applying the market philosophy to HE. For them, the UK government and universities work together to earn a share of the global HE market to develop the economy and achieve extra funding. Further to this consensus understanding, Chinese students interpreted the marketisation more through their own experience and observation of the market practice that the government, the sector and other service providers executed.

Firstly, they shared their experience of UK education overseas marketing and branding, which made them think that higher education was commercialised. The primary marketing strategy is promoting universities with high-ranking positions and prestige. Students who attended the

education fairs and campaigns organised by the agents of the UK government or universities gained the impression that the ranking is the only criterion to evaluate the quality of the universities. Universities in the UK have been ranked as the world's Top 100 universities and are the focus of marketing. The interviewees argued that marketing and branding strategy influences how the Chinese labour market perceives the UK-graduated Chinese returners. In addition, Chinese parents and prospective students are also influenced heavily by the university's ranking and prestige. Most students desire to have an offer from the top 100 universities. Some consider it the minimum threshold the Chinese labour market accepts, while others just desire to go to the best universities. While some students considered they were forced to play the ranking game, others chose their preference without overthinking about ranking. It is worth mentioning that while students heavily focused on the university ranking, they prioritised their major over the school ranking position. Most of them decided on what they wanted to study at the decision-making of postgraduate study.

The Chapter 2 literature review shows that the government places various regulations on HE teaching and research quality. However, students have no idea of how to access the information. While the downsides of using ranking and the technical flaws of the ranking systems have been demonstrated in the literature review, most students took the ranking for granted (e.g., Cebolla-Boado et al, 2018) and perceived it as the university quality indicator. Chapter 2 also reviews the marketing and branding strategy implemented by British Council and Universities UK. Chinese students experiences reveal more aggressive commercial behaviours which highly associated with university rankings.

Secondly, students argued that the tuition fee international students have to pay is expensive, different and keeps rising. They compared the different tuition fee regimes between China and the UK and considered the tuition fee they paid in the UK as another significant characteristic of marketisation. The tuition fee and their living costs were claimed as the motivation of the UK government and the sector reinventing the HE sector as an industry. While students have the price sensitivity, they considered the characteristics of tuition fee as a commercial behaviour of HEIs. Compared to the main argument that tuition fee triggers students' consumer mindset and behaviour as reviewed in Chapter 2, survey participants (about 50%) agreed with the term of student-consumer and view their PG as a product. The interview analysis achieved further understanding which students tend to agree the consumer position in financial term. By examining their orientation towards their expectation, commitment and entitlement, the tuition fee do not trigger the participants' consumer behaviours.

Thirdly, a prominent characteristic of marketisation was ‘easy in’ (university admission) and ‘easy out’ (assessment). Within the context of marketisation, students emphasised that some universities shifted the focus of admission from selecting students who are fit for the course to hitting the target of student numbers. Therefore, some participants argued that it was easy to get into the universities regardless of their educational backgrounds or academic abilities. The assessment was considered easy when it associates with some ‘majors for profits’ or when teachers were under pressure. Interviewees argued that it is a common phenomenon that universities set up some majors to gain profit instead of education within the changing purpose. Students experienced the ‘Chinese school’, dominated by Chinese students, leading to a lack of diversity and a poor learning experience. Due to the nature of generating revenue, students expressed that leeway exists for negotiation and renegotiation with their institutions when they fail the examinations. They also gain the impression from the service of complaining about the marks on behalf of students commonly existing in the international student industry. Meanwhile, students were critical of some of their peers who did not cherish the precious chance and dedicate themselves to their studies but still achieved their degrees through the leeway provided by universities or the service provided by the industry.

Aligned with what Jabbar et al, (2017) indicate that international student recruitment is overly associated with financial concern. The authors show one main marketisation characteristic is that students who are offered places mostly due to their affordability to pay rather than academic ability. The findings of this study also indicate that students view the lower admission requirement as one of main signs of their PG education has been marketised. With students who considered they benefit from institutional commercial operation; the sense of transactional entitlement exists at the non-academic phrase. Instead of thinking ‘I paid, give me my degree’, they had the mindset of ‘I got in because I paid’.

The understanding of the characteristics of marketisation of UK HE expands to the Chinese society and the labour market. Interviewees were fully aware of a negative narrative about studying postgraduate in the UK. Students who study in the UK postgraduate and achieve a master’s degree are called ‘shuishuo’ (direct translation as ‘watery master’) in China, meaning having a master’s degree without achieving solid knowledge or skills by paying high tuition fees. Students considered that marketisation’s money-making nature slowly damaged UK higher education’s reputation in China, especially with the one-year postgraduate programme. The Chinese labour market is no



longer surprised by returning UK graduates with highly ranked university degrees who could not hold a simple English conversation or complete a technical task. Students claimed they face distrust and challenges in finding jobs and public criticism when they return to China with their English certificates.

### **9.2.2.2 The international student industry**

The students reported an international student industry centred around their needs in the UK, which presents another aspect of marketisation. With the UK government and universities objectifying international students as a source of income, students considered the external industry that dedicated services to students and is keen on a market share of international education. All the interviewees are aware of educational agents and the majority of the service that the international student industry provides them. They had a clear concept that they were the customers to please. They were able to make a judgement about these services being provided by the educational agents and other service providers. Most interviewees did not recommend using agents as they considered university application an essential part of understanding the course and having a higher chance of making the right decision. These students are aware of the various levels of service provided by the educational agents, and some of them ended up with poor service but found no way to complain and resolve. Although students were sceptical about the educational agents, they tended not to associate the agents with the universities they applied to in the UK. They recognised the intention of generating revenue for the HE sector, but they still held faith and respect for the sector. They believed that the purpose of HE is beyond doing business, which led them to have less tendency to see the sector through the lens of business. Some students even felt upset and disappointed when knowing universities in the UK had to pay commission to the agents. While a small proportion of students illustrated that universities and agents play an essential role in steering the marketisation, students who paid to use the service also accelerated the marketisation of higher education. A main concern was placed on the services students considered as lack of morals, such as ghost-writing and attendance replacement on behalf of failing students. Within this context, students consider there is a chance to 'purchase the degree' not through executing the consumer right but through the 'leeway' provided by some universities and the immoral practice serviced by the international student industry.

### **9.2.2.3 Different attitudes towards marketisation**

The interviewees held three different attitudes towards marketisation and varied acceptance towards market logic conducted by different HE stakeholders. A small group of interviewees (n=8)

understood the inevitability of UK higher education being operated as an industry by the UK government to serve the economy. The students that agreed with marketisation considered it an inevitable trend as they argued they were living in a society where “everything is centred on developing the economy”. Consequently, marketisation is a part of the internationalisation of higher education. Thirteen students claimed to be neutral and considered that funding is essential to the university’s development. When more students are offered the chance to study in the UK, more revenue will be generated to develop the universities, leading to a win-win situation. However, these students emphasised that a balance should be achieved. They hope more international students benefit from the chance but desire a good learning experience and to achieve knowledge, skills and personal growth. Nearly 60% (n=30) of the participants were critical as they considered over-marketing would lead to poor teaching and learning experiences, and the university’s long-term reputation will be eroded by the short-sighted goal of immediate cash at the expense of academic standards and integrity. Most importantly, they considered the reputation to be damaged as graduates returning to China face doubts and distrust.

### **9.2.3 Chinese students’ interpretation of the identity of international students**

As described in Chapter 2, literature review, section 2 of the international student policy, an international student is a status that overseas students need to meet various requirements to earn. Their visa status and their “dependence on continuing institutional goodwill” makes them vulnerable (The Guardian, 2021). Students outside of the UK have to prepare many documents to achieve a visa and comply with the Home Office immigration rules; otherwise, they face the risk of their visa being revoked and losing their status as international students. Therefore, students in this study seem to voluntarily participate in the marketisation of UK higher education to exchange higher education chances. They did not associate being international students paying the full fees with the entitlement of a degree or with the consumer rights the UK government promotes.

Students accept the status and the expectation embedded with the identity of an international student. The identity offers them an official reason to be present in the UK. It is a status that students seem to take for granted and they apparently internalised the narrative of economic benefit. Although only one interviewee directly used ‘cash cow’ to rephrase international students, most participants recognised their purpose of servicing the economic benefit of the UK nation and the HE sector. Therefore, they accepted the phenomena of external industry, the different tuition fee schemes, and specific commercial majors. Being an international student was also

interpreted as being a foreigner. Being in a foreign country is one of the reasons that some students consider they cannot enjoy the rights embedded with consumer positioning.

#### **9.2.4 The imperceptible consumer identity**

While there is broad recognition of the marketisation of UK higher education and the market practice executed by the government, HE sector and the international student industry, students responded to the identity of consumer with a significantly high level of unfamiliarity. The finding further proves what Brooks and Abrahams (2018) suggested that a fourth group of students who never engage with the concept of consumerism and the identity of consumer. Over 70% of interview participants (n=36) reported it was their first time encountering the concept of students as consumers when they participated in the survey. They reported initially feeling surprised, confused and ambivalent about the discourse when first encountering the phrase in the survey. Some interviewees (n=10/51) related the identity to the everyday consumption of tangible goods and services, such as textbooks from the bookstore and a cup of tea from the university café. The relation is consistent with the finding of Koris et al (2015) that some consumer behaviour of Finnish students presented in certain categories of educational experience, but not in all aspects of what their universities offered.

In this study, students argued that their educational and socio-cultural background caused unfamiliarity with the discourse and lack of understanding of the positioning. The students considered that the majority of Chinese universities are state-funded without the application of market-led logic. The relationship between their undergraduate universities and them was nowhere near consumers and service providers. The discourse also was interpreted as ‘offensive’ because some participants did express their ‘anger’ towards the concept and did not understand the meaning of this study. Their first reaction/engagement with the student-consumer identity means they ‘purchase’ their degrees without dedication and achievement of skills and knowledge. They perceived the discourse as entirely negative without being aware that there are rights behind the identity.

Current literature (e.g., Bunce et al, 2017; Bunce & Bennett, 2021) argues that paying tuition fees and the increasing rate trigger students’ consumer thinking and behaviours. In this study, nearly half of the survey participants in this study agreed with the statement ‘concerning the university, I attended/am attending; I think of myself primarily as a consumer of the university’. The interviewees agreed with the statement, considering the tuition fee they paid did position them as

consumers in the financial term. They felt the high costs associated with UK HEIs were worthwhile compared to the huge amount of time and effort required for Chinese academic selection schemes, not to mention the high chance of failing to gain entry. In addition, the students who successfully changed their subject areas, which is less likely to happen domestically, also recognised the power of their tuition fees. Although these reflections represent an obvious consumer mindset, these students do not position themselves as consumers. They see the transactional traits of their education as part of marketisation of UK higher education and their consumer thinking mainly presented prior to entry and in their non-academic interactions with the university.

While some participants disagreed that paying tuition fees made them consumers as they considered paying tuition fees are the default, especially some considered HEIs to be selective, and not everyone can study in the university only because they can afford the tuition fee. Most participants considered that the marketisation of UK higher education did give more students a chance to enjoy education in institutions with prestige and high-ranking positions. However, they argued they bought the educational opportunity, not the degree itself. While the participants study at the postgraduate level, among the most expensive programmes at UK institutions, with their family's support, the cost of studying in the UK seems invisible to the participants. Therefore, the tuition fee has little influence on students' daily lives and does not necessarily trigger a consumerist mindset.

The debate about student as consumer centred around student-consumer's instrumentalism (e.g., Furedi, 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2015). There are concerns about students being instrumental towards their studies, which focus more on career prospects and economic returns than genuine interest in a subject and care about deep learning and personal development. Chapter 7 reveals that both datasets show that most Chinese students did not consider the university's main purpose was boosting their career prospects. They believed studying in the UK was more than getting a better job. In terms of economic returns, only a small number of survey participants considered wasting time studying in the UK if they could not maximise their economic returns. It is worth noticing that students with sufficient financial support have more confidence about their choices and are free, not constrained to do things they prefer due to either current or future economic concerns. Students also argued that the UK degree is not a guarantee for a better job or gaining better economic outcomes based on the perception of the Chinese labour market and the cost/benefit of UK tuition fees and graduate salaries in China. The results align with some

literature (e.g., Xiong & Mok, 2020; Yu et al, 2023), in which the relation of a UK degree and Chinese returnees' job searches and career prospects have been questioned. The survey results show that a university's location was even prioritised by some students over employment prospects. However, students did admit that having a master's degree from top universities was highly desired due to their social-cultural background. The education-first culture drives students to want to go to top institutions. Having an offer from prestigious and top world universities for some participants was an end in itself.

One of the rationalities of student-as-consumer promoted by the UK government is that students are entitled to demand more transparent information and good value for money from their institutions and enjoy their rights being protected (Dearing, 1997; Consumer Rights Act, 2015; OfS, 2023). In practice, researchers are concerned that students might interpret consumer rights as having their degrees with minimum effort (e.g., Molesworth et al, 2009; Naidoo et al, 2011). Students in this study had a different sense of entitlement and demanded consumer rights. They argued that being identified as international students, foreigners and Chinese conflicts with consumer identity. First, they argued that they have to gain the right to be international students from the UK government and HEIs, where they are in the vulnerable position. Secondly, being in a foreign country means they must have a similar social understanding of the government policy as home students. Students argued they could do nothing to demand their rights or confront the university's wrongdoings without knowing the HE regulator and adjudicator. Even knowing there are regulators, Chapter 6 revealed that 34/51 students did not separate the UK government and HE sector regarding marketisation, which made them think it is impossible to make universities accountable.

The current literature also suggests that student-consumer actively respond to their dissatisfaction and make complaints as consumers (e.g., Finney & Finney, 2010; Tomlinson, 2014, 2016). However, Chinese students took a passive mode towards their dissatisfaction. Most interviewees (n=43/51) chose to refrain from taking action if they had complaints with their institutions or teaching staff. They considered confrontation might cause different problems, and their educational and cultural background drove them to avoid confronting their teachers and institutions. In addition, faith in change remains low among these students, especially when students lack a sense of belonging and knowledge. When students reflected on dealing with dissatisfaction, they emphasised the vulnerability of being foreigners and Chinese. In fact, British nationality students expressed the same vulnerability in the study of Brooks & Abrahams (2018).

The authors find that British students considered the consumer rights were “a form of lip service to placate them” and “a false hope” (p.199). The length of the study was also one of the main reasons that students took a passive mode towards their dissatisfaction, as they considered there was insufficient time to deal with their complaints. These findings again indicate a disconnect between the policy and practice. The complexity of students as consumers in practice with students’ concerns and vulnerabilities make the ‘empowered student-consumer’ far beyond students’ reach. The consumer rights remain largely unknown to the participants in this study, let alone they have internalised the inequality of being Chinese, foreigner, international students might bring.

The current literature (e.g., Lesnik-Oberstein, 2015) emphasises that student-consumers demand good value for money from their institutions, and the important elements are economic gain and career prospects. However, the study shows a different evaluation from Chinese students. Firstly, students consider the chance to study in the UK HEIs that satisfy them and have the sense of achieving good value for money. Some students recognised that the chance allowed them to search for truth and meet their desire to see, hear and learn. Fourteen participants claimed to have had good jobs before returning to student life. They appreciated the chance that allowed them to update their thinking and see a whole new world. Chapter 4 revealed that 59% of survey respondents changed their subject areas, primarily due to finding a subject with genuine interest. These students recognised that the chance to change subject areas in China was low; therefore, having an opportunity to study a subject that some participants longed for was a great satisfaction and good value for money.

Secondly, students had greater achievement of the value of money through their dedication to their studies and experience. As they recognised the precious chance, students considered their effort and dedication to allow them to make the most of the university’s resources. Students (n=7/51) expressed shame and regret not dedicating enough to their studies and not making the most of their chances.

Thirdly, one of the biggest motivations for most survey participants and interviewees is experiencing different cultures and lifestyles. Intercultural competence was seen as an important element of the good value of money. Some students saw intercultural competence as social and cultural capital that might benefit them later in life and at work.

Last but not least, students consider that personal transformation and development will bring them lifelong benefits, which they consider the most important element for the value of money. Over 60% of survey respondents chose self-improvement as one of their top three reasons to study abroad. Twenty-one interviewees considered personal transformation the most significant element that satisfied them most. They generally understood that improving themselves would have lifelong positive impacts, and the transformative effects are intangible and take time to achieve. Personal transformation encompasses enhancing their confidence, independence, tolerance, and resilience.

## **9.2.5 The preferred learner identity and the insights of ‘Chinese learners’**

### **9.2.5.1 The popular learner identity**

Both data sets reveal that the learner’s identity was the most preferred for how Chinese students view themselves and how they want to be defined. Chapter 4 reveals that Chinese students are motivated to do postgraduate study due to their interest in a subject area and eagerness to improve personal development. The desire to have their learning environment outside of China due to the culture, language and academic setting also reveals students’ learner positioning. The learner’s identity was accepted and preferred by both survey and interview participants as the best identification and role to define them while studying in the UK. While 2.4% of survey participants chose not to be identified as a learner, none of the interviewees expressed negative comments or feelings during the interviews. Most interviewees (n=43) argued that they intended to study. Although Chapter 4 revealed various motivations for postgraduate study abroad and in the UK, which might position them other than learners, when facing the learner’s identity, these interviewees firmly attached themselves to it.

There are three main reasons for this identification explained by the interviewees. Firstly, the learner is chosen because students argued that it best matched their main purpose. The identity best addresses their general desire to learn about themselves, new cultures, subjects, and academic settings and learn how to be more independent, confident, inclusive, and so on. The desire to learn to be better was shared among all the interviewees. The expectations of learning outcomes are that changes occur in worldview, self, and behaviour. The study experience is looked forward to for transformative, emotional, and social learning. Secondly, the learner is considered to have an inclusive identity; as Lu (F/ Education) illustrated, “the beauty of the identity is that it does not differentiate the race, nationality and how much you pay. We are all learners, and we have the same goal, which is to learn.”

Thirdly, the learner is an identity embedded in some interview participants' (n=13) lifelong plans. Six participants in this study had two masters, and seven were doing their PhD studies. One common perspective they shared was the intrinsic value of learning which would be lifelong. They embraced the identity with pride and excitement. Having a master's or higher degree was no longer their motivation. Instead, they chose a different or even the same subject because they are keen to update their knowledge and thinking.

Chapter 5 further reflects on Chinese students' commitment and approaches to their studies and their opinions on the teaching practice and teacher-student relationship. The interview data presented a rough academic start that the majority of interviewees (n=46/51) commonly faced. The challenges were studying with a second language, thinking as a Western learner, adjusting to the new 'freedom', and engaging interculturally. These challenges are on top of the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate, commonly discussed as the difficulties that international students face. However, the critical point from the finding was Chinese students' commitment as active learners to conquer the language barriers, recognise the value of being critical, negotiate with their old learner identity, and try to be independent and participate in intercultural engagements.

The rough start was a meaningful chance to achieve academic and personal transformation. Most interviewees appreciated the chance to engage with different academic settings and left their comfort zone to experience this. They witnessed a process of forming a new learning identity which is more independent and proactive with being able to think critically. The students who considered themselves to get through the rough start had a great sense of achievement. Some students consider personal transformation a positive lifelong impact, viewed as the best value for money.

#### **9.2.5.2 Chinese students' perception of 'Chinese learner'**

The study also explores Chinese students' perceptions of the 'Chinese learner', an identity associated with students from China, mainly from mainland China, who often lack certain skills to achieve academic success. The qualitative data reveals five aspects of 51 interviewees' perceptions of the positioning. Interview participants consider four positive aspects of being a Chinese learner, significantly different from the narrative circulated among most literature. Firstly, interviewees recognised China's education-first culture and understood that their family and the wider society prioritised their education. Thus, they expressed a sense of security and pride in being a learner in



China not only because of the current social and cultural emphasis on education but also the traditional educational values. The identity of student is seen as honourable and with status in China; whereas in the UK it is often seen as unproductive and self-indulgent. Twelve interviewees felt proud of their traditional education values. These participants considered that Confucius's philosophy influences Chinese learners. A common trait repeatedly mentioned is being humble to learn and learn from others, as there is always space for self-improvement. Therefore, they considered their intention of studying in the UK to be learning. They desire to learn the culture, the language, and the knowledge their university and teachers provide. Some (n=13) insisted that being a learner was a nature which should not be questioned, and it was unnecessary to justify their learning intention. When they were asked about other motivations, such as travelling and having fun, these students claimed that they prioritised studying and dealing with academic demands first. Thus, the learner identity was interpreted on the opposite side of the consumer identity. Fundamentally, students in this study refused to accept the consumer identity as their interpretation of being consumers meaning that their achievements, such as degrees and personal improvement, came from the tuition they paid instead of the effort and dedication they devoted to their studies.

Secondly, Li (2001) argued that Chinese cultural concepts of learning involve diligence, endurance of hardship and seeking knowledge as a lifelong orientation. Most interviewees agreed with Li's concepts and further shared two common traits of Chinese learners emerged from the intensive academic demands and cultural influence which are growth mindset and grit. They summarised a belief that one's capability is not limited by natural intelligence but rather can be cultivated through consistent dedication helped them survive or thrive during the Gaokao. Over two thirds of interviewees considered that being smart without dedication would not lead them to success, but a growth mindset and grit would. Therefore, they considered that these characteristics led Chinese learners to study all over the world.

Thirdly, being a Chinese learner also means that they believe the merits of their previous educational system enables them to adapt to a new learning environment. The aforementioned common traits: growth mindset and grit, became powerful tools for them to achieve different levels of improvement or success in transitions. Chapter 5 discussed that most interviewees had a rough start, but they applied psychological thinking to face the challenges. By improving academic prospects according to their terms and paces leads students to the highest satisfaction. In return, the sense of achievement reinforced their Chinese learner identity.

Fourthly, students reflected that collective study culture is embedded in the identity of Chinese learners. The phrase ‘bao tuan qu nuan’ has gradually become a metaphor for expressing mutual assistance and cooperation and accumulating strength to increase confidence and overcome the most challenging period. It was used by 37 interviewees when they considered a common trait of Chinese learners. First, ‘Baotuan’ was perceived as a collective community culture in the context of students studying overseas. It was argued as a social inclusion to help them settle in better and quicker. While the strengths of being collective and collaborative were highlighted, some interviewees (n=17) perceived ‘baotuan’ negatively. It was used to refer to the phenomenon of Chinese students sticking together as a group inside and outside the classroom. The participants recognised that the behaviour impacted their academic and social life negatively—a practical factor brought up by students who study within subject areas dominated by Chinese students. Twelve interviewees came from Engineering & Technology and Business & Administrative Studies and reported that over 90% of their classmates were Chinese. ‘Baotuan’ became inevitable, and these students admitted that they could only speak English when they talked to their teachers in private meetings. The English environment was much worse than they had predicted.

The final aspect aligned with the narrative of “deficit Chinese learners”, which was interpreted negatively. Seventeen students considered that the rough start commonly faced by Chinese students could devalue teaching and learning quality. They were concerned that teachers chose to accommodate students’ initial capability and compromise academic standards. The passive and instrumental aspects were considered to reinforce the “Chinese learners” stereotype. Chinese was chosen the most when survey respondents were asked how their teachers identified them while they were studying in the UK. Interviewees explained that some of their teachers could not get over the fact that there were so many Chinese in the classroom, could not help treating all Chinese students as a homogenous group, and lacked the motivation to be attentive and approachable.

## **9.2.6 Student-teacher relationship and expectations from teachers**

### **9.2.6.1 The relationship between teachers and Chinese students**

Chapter 5 presents students’ perspectives on their relationship with their teaching staff. Teachers play a significant role in students’ learning identity development. Compared to the UK government and the HE sector, the teaching staff are on the frontline of teaching and learning communities. Their interaction with students influences how students form their learning identity and their commitment and approaches towards their studies. The interview data reveal that Chinese students

with a long history of Chinese education background with Confucian heritage see their teachers as knowledge distributors with high moral standards and a strong willingness to commit their time and energy towards teaching and tutoring them regardless of China or in the UK. The hierarchical relationship between students and teachers in China makes students need help with the unstructured academic setting and teaching in the UK HEIs. Students reported that they enjoyed the equality and respect that the PG teachers offered to them while deeply struggling to understand “why did their teachers not teach”? They compared the amount of knowledge and classes offered in China.

As students perceived their teachers should know more and better than them, they were keen to ask for confirmation and reassurance for their academic performance. While students worried about their marks and desired good grades and higher classification of degrees, they did not see it as teachers' responsibility to ensure they passed their courses. They did not have a sense of entitlement that teachers should let them pass but they had a strong expectation of teachers being caring, dedicated and passionate about sharing their knowledge and skills with them. Students applied the same morality and expectation that they had in China to their teachers in the UK.

Five interviewees emphasised the benefits of the close teacher-student relationships, which meant they had a chance to interact with their teachers with their research interests and be inspired by teachers' experiences. The one-on-one support and encouragement did get these students better academic performance and more confidence in their learner identity. However, some students (n=11/51) claimed that they had poor learning experience with teachers who made minimum efforts in teaching and tutoring. These students were not satisfied with teachers' careless attitudes and considered they were treated as products. Those with weak learner identities are not supported appropriately, and their lack the sense of belonging to a learning community may slowly transform them into consumers who only care about how to get the degree with minimal effort. Students with typical consumer and instrumental behaviours situated within the context of ‘tinned tomatoes’ (the phrase was used by some students argued that some of their lecturers acted like resemble workers with perfunctory attitudes towards teaching and students tutoring) may never be able to establish learner identity.

The learner identity was emphasised most when interviewees faced the choices of identifications and acceptance of how their teachers defined them. None could accept teachers identifying them as consumers. The typical answer was either ‘I cannot take it’ or ‘It is unacceptable’. They expressed

their strong rejections of teachers who identified students as consumers emotionally, morally and financially.

Students strongly emphasised that the teacher-student relationship should remain within the teaching and learning sphere. As mentioned above, students perceived teachers as well respected by society and their parents; they enjoyed authority and high social status like teachers in China. At the same time, they expect teachers to commit their knowledge, time and energy to teach and tutor them without getting involved with market logic. Students consider teachers who adopt a business philosophy and consider students as consumers to be unethical. They felt disappointed if teachers did not want to fulfil their obligation to help students to achieve better themselves and reach their potential. The increasing tensions between academics and university leaders on balancing academic integrity and financial viability (Lomas 2007; Jabbar et al, 2017) have not been noticed by the participants. Overall, students in this study have little knowledge about how the market mechanisms impact the teaching and their teachers. They assumed that their teaching staff were well-paid, with the university's intention to generate revenue from them. As chapter 7 revealed, some interviewees chose to accommodate the marketisation and pay the substantial-high tuition fees. The tolerance of being identified as consumers by the UK government was higher than being identified as such by universities. However, there was zero tolerance towards teachers identifying them as consumers.

#### **9.2.6.2 The invisible academic partner**

The survey results showed most respondents did not choose an 'academic partner' to identify themselves while studying in the UK and disagreed with their position as co-creators of postgraduate education. Most interview respondents did not associate themselves with the identity of an academic partner, and the positioning was considered a conflict with their learner identity. Most interviewees (n=45) felt that identity required a high standard of knowledge and expertise. They struggled with the position of being co-creators of a lecture. They lacked awareness of themselves being the co-producers when they participated in the seminars sharing their perspectives and making contributions.

As discussed before, nearly half of the survey participants identified as learners, and another half as international students, which highlighted participants' more passive learning mentality rather than creating mentality. The idea of co-creating a lecture content or curriculum remained new and daunting to students because their teachers did not share the expectations of students being

academic partners. Their previous mindset was ‘zun shi zhong jiao’ (尊师重道: honouring teachers and respecting their expertise). The term has been a long tradition with a thousand years of history in China. The difference in learning culture, beliefs and values might prevent them from being active in partnering with their teachers. Aligned with previously mentioned literature, students reacted with sceptical, scared and confused attitudes towards the identity. For example, Bai claimed that ‘I am most uncomfortable with the status of academic partner. I did not feel we (teachers and I) had any concept of collaboration’ (Bai/F/Creative Arts & Design).

Another strong argument is that the academic partnership remains among students rather than with teachers. The hierarchy of student-teacher relationships in their undergraduate education prevents some students from positioning themselves as equal to their teachers. The teachers’ ideas and teaching content are authoritative, and students choose not to criticise or change. Participants consider it hard to position teachers as partners in the postgraduate course with a historical mindset of respecting teachers’ authority and expertise.

A small number of participants ( $m=6/51$ ) had a stronger connection with the identity of academic partners. However, these students claimed that they did not experience academic challenges and had a better understanding of western curricula. Another key element for them was to be confident as teachers’ partners as they held a more relaxed attitude towards the teacher-student relationship. They did not assume or expect that teachers know better or more than them, as most other participants do.

The findings are inconsistent with many academics’ results. The increasing tension between students and teachers due to marketisation and consumerism is widely discussed (e.g., Brown & Carasso, 2013; Ek et al, 2013; Nixon et al, 2018 and Tomlinson, 2015, 2017). The authors considered that the students’ consumer mindset transformed them from active to passive learners, which diminish the value of deep learning and critical thinking. However, students in this study recognised their struggles due to different educational systems and took responsibility to tackle the difficulties. They expressed no sense of teachers as service providers. The tension is observed within themselves, which is the conflicts between their old learner identity and the new transforming western identity. Although students interpreted ‘Chinese learner’ as a positive identity, there are some overlap characteristics between the ‘deficit Chinese learners’ and ‘demanding consumers’, such as passive learning, lack of critical thinking and independent learning.

### **9.3 Implications**

The findings reveal how Chinese students perceive the student-consumer identity and offer their perspectives on whether they view themselves as consumers. How they see their relationship with their institutions and teachers further reveals how they consider the purpose of HE. The study also explored Chinese students' insights on the identities of international students, academic partners, learners/Chinese learners, foreigners and Chinese, which further broadened the overall understanding of HE students' identity constructs and relational aspects. Although Chinese students expressed a sense of unfamiliarity towards the 'student-consumer' discourse at the start of interviews, they did offer this study deep reflection what it means to them and how they situate the position when interacting with other HE stakeholders. They invested time and passion to challenge the concept, question the rationality and identify their preference with their experience, which provided new insights on the impact of neoliberal ideology to students. With their identity of international students, they are on the frontline to experience the practice of neoliberal ideology and the market-logic that the UK government and institutions executed, therefore, the findings contribute important implications for HE practitioners and policy makers to come up with more practical strategies to engage with international students and plans for a sustainable international higher education. The existing research on international students' discourse of consumer is sparse and fails to describe how international students perceive the consumerist discourse and the wider implications of marketisation. Therefore, the study has implications for research and scholarship.

As argued, international students are under-represented within the current discussion and debate of the concept of student as consumer. Chinese students' social identities are highly associated with economic benefit or academic deficit. Therefore, having Chinese postgraduate students reflect on their experiences and perspectives contributes new dimensions to how contemporary HE students construct their identities within the marketised higher education sector, which hopefully further attracts research interest from policy makers, institutional practitioners and scholars in the area of higher education studies.

#### **9.3.1 Implications for policy**

Firstly, the findings from this study hope to inspire policymakers to offer international students more transparent information and rights. In addition, international students' interests should be included at the policy level, making them aware of higher education regulators and related policies. Thus, international students will have more faith that the government will protect their rights, and

they will be able to voice when their institutions fall short. The rationality of consumer identity has the potential to empower students with wider choices and transparent information. However, when students in this study do not have the same level of socio-cultural understanding, the rationality fails to support all students. The exploration of how the marketisation impacts on Chinese students contributes new insights to the policy makers to reconceptualise students' position in the policy level. The findings add to the scant literature in the field of understanding international students' perspectives towards HE policy and UK HE inner mechanism.

Secondly, the international student policy overemphasised the economic benefit and reinforced the stereotyped international students as 'cash cows' for the national and the HE sector. Although international students currently voluntarily participate in marketisation and recognise themselves as neoliberal objects, other aims of developing international education, such as social and cultural benefits, should be equally emphasised so that the quality of international education and sustainability development in the long run. Students in this study fail to understand the rationality of the concept of students as consumer promoted by the government shows an ideology gap between policy and practice. The concept promotes that fee payers should have voice of what they want and demand the quality from higher education sector. However, international student policy highly focused on economic benefit of international students and the compliance they must commit, which conflict with the rationality of 'student-consumer' and further create inequality among students. Understanding what the consumer discourse means to Chinese students points out that all the talk of consumer choice and the importance of consumers are not actually what the consumers want.

Thirdly, international students are targeted by multiple stakeholders. The international student industry conducting immoral practices without regulation risks the exploitation of students and the HE sector. Reflecting through participants' negative experience with educational agents and reporting some unethical practices conducted by the international student industry, extra caution and scrutiny should be placed on the service provided outside the campus. The agents and different commercial practitioners step in to exploit the gap in the market that the consumerist approach promoted by the government and the sector being alien to Chinese students creates. The international student industry is situated within a grey area and neither UK nor Chinese governments have not taken action to regulate its practice. Dubious practices such as ghost writing and university application on behalf of students based on inaccurate materials will damage HE's

reputation and academic integrity. Therefore, the UK government and the sector should work together to tackle immoral market practices.

Last, international postgraduate students' employability and satisfaction should be included in the datasets of key quality indicators, which further protect postgraduate students' rights. Although the finding suggests that Chinese students do not consider their employability as their institutions' responsibility and generally take no action when they have dissatisfaction, including their figures can improve the equality and inclusive of higher education. Currently, maintaining students' satisfaction through ranking might be an efficient strategy for marketing and branding. However, university ranking reinforces the symbolic power and accelerates the HE hierarchy. The alternative strategy might be more sustainable by educating the students, parents and the labour market that UK HEIs are not just about their rankings. The more that institutions and the government promote and embrace league tables, the more the sector is controlled by the rankings, which the more students will view the league tables as the criteria of HE quality and rely on them to make choices. In addition, there are many local institutions in the UK which equally deserve global exposure and have chance to be recognised by international students. New and innovative recruitment approaches should be adopted instead of over emphasising the ranking positions and having the large elite universities dominate the whole internationalisation of UK HE.

### **9.3.2 Implications for practice**

Cheng & Adekola (2022) argued that "teachers' kind-heartedness is a central value in the Chinese education system" (p.18). Therefore, promoting a culture of kindness within the teaching and learning community can enhance students' well-being and encourage positive learner identity. The market logic governance and the culture of performativity have driven teaching staff to face increasing workloads. However, the findings show that students know little about how marketisation impacts teachers. On the contrary, they assumed teachers are the beneficiaries of marketisation as they are well-paid and provided with the best resources. Therefore, students do expect the most from the teaching staff. They hope their teachers offer them knowledge, close interaction, and care for their studies and well-being. These demands are defended as teachers' obligation and students do recognise their duties of making efforts. The participants in this study value the teacher-student relationship and they reject that being consumerised. Thus, universities should encourage teachers to develop mutual understanding and positive relationships with students. Failing to understand students' expectation and perceptions of teacher-student relationship will damage the core foundation of teaching and learning. Having more staff knowing



what the consumer discourse and marketisation mean to their students, they can engage students with accurate pedagogical approaches and academic settings.

Another implication for practice is about the students' preference for more content. There is frequently a pressure to always be more interactive, to abandon lectures as a teaching method and running lectures as open discussion seminars. However, this is not necessarily what most Chinese students want. As influenced by their educational background, they do wish to learn from their teachers. The inadequate feeling of being an academic partner and insignificant awareness of co-creating the curriculum are highly common among these participants. The finding suggests that caution should be paid by staff when judging students' behaviours through the lens of 'students as demanding consumers'. In students' own defence, they demand as learners rather than consumers.

The findings also show that intercultural competence is an important element of students' motivation and evaluation of the value of money and identity construction. However, lacking a diverse environment and high-quality intercultural contact is an issue that has been raised for many years. With the heavy emphasis on the intercultural engagement and personal growth of students' motivation, the practitioners and faculty should help students to meet their expectations. With an accurate understanding of Chinese students' expectations, the pedagogy and programmes can be shaped accordingly. Therefore, universities should take students' desires seriously, offer students a high-quality intercultural environment and contact, and reduce social isolation.

### **9.3.3 Implications for research and scholarship**

The results inform the understanding of the impact of marketisation on higher education within the current discussion and research. As there is scant literature asking how Chinese students view the influence of marketisation of UK higher education and how their day to day lives are impacted by the marketised HE sector, therefore, the findings of this study can be compared with previous studies such as Tomlinson (2017) and Reynolds (2022). For example, when UK students showed acceptance, resistance and ambivalence towards the identity of 'student as consumer', Chinese students expressed strong rejections when the discourse is applied to teaching and learning. Whereas most literature did not investigate students' perspectives towards the positioning placed on them by different HE stakeholders, the study examines students' acceptance and resistance of the consumerist discourse and market logics as applied by the UK government, students' institutions and their teaching staff, which further reveals different levels of acceptance and resistance exist when students face different objects. The findings show that Chinese students in

this study had a clear vision of how their relationship with the UK government, their institutions and their teachers should be. Therefore, the study can inspire scholars to investigate students' perspectives with different intentions from different social actors.

Generally, in this study Chinese postgraduates do not behave like students in other studies. Although they show some features of consumerism, these are related to more marginal parts of the student experience and do not apply to the core of university learning. Instead, they draw on a deep-seated cultural script based on the teacher/student relationship, which means existing ideas are only moderately useful in understanding the behaviour of this huge group of people (both in UK HE and globally).

#### **9.4 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

This study focuses on Chinese postgraduate students who studied their undergraduate in China. While having experience with two different higher education systems drove participants to compare the difference between the two and reflect on the identity construction within different educational beliefs and values, the postgraduate study only lasted a year. Therefore, it might be interesting to explore Chinese undergraduate and PhD students who stay longer in the UK and experience more in the higher education sector. Long-stay sojourners might have different levels of understanding of the internal and external HE mechanism. It is worth exploring their perspectives on the same subject and understanding how they construct their identities. In addition, comparative studies between PG and UG students or between Chinese and other nationalities students are also encouraged to conduct. For example, there are other large 'sender' countries such as India and Nigeria. It will be interesting to explore the perspectives of these students who are with different social, cultural and educational background. In addition, it might also be interesting to investigate Chinese students' consumer orientation towards their studies in different more or less consumerist/marketised destinations such as USA, Australia or Germany and Netherlands. The latter two are far less marketised than the others. A longitudinal study following students from the start to the end of their course is also an opportunity for further investigation.

Most of interview participants expressed studying in the UK without financial stress, which might present as privileged set of Chinese students. International students should not be all portrayed as wealthy and privileged as some study in the UK with socio-economic disadvantage background (Schartner & Shields, 2023). It would be interesting to compare perspectives of students with

different socioeconomic backgrounds. Those who have higher stakes attached to the financing of their studies, for example, students with scholarship who would not otherwise have been afford studying in the UK, might provide different perspectives.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Survey content

### Part 1 Consent Form 同意书

Dear Participant,

You have been invited to take part in my PhD research project. Before continuing, please read this information carefully:

The research aims to explore how Chinese postgraduate taught students perceive the identity of 'consumer' in English higher education. By complete the following questionnaire, you will be contributing towards the understanding of the concept of 'student as consumer', a current debate within the higher education sector in England.

The questionnaire should take around 15 minutes to complete at any time that is convenient for you. All the data will be anonymous and be stored in a password protected file and will only be accessible to the researchers involved in the project. The anonymous data may be used in presentations, online, in research reports, in project summaries or similar. In addition, the anonymous data may also be used for further analysis and publications.

Your individual data will not be identifiable but if you do not want the data to be used in this way, please do not complete the questionnaire. If you do agree to complete the questionnaire you are free to leave any questions unanswered or to stop completing the questionnaire altogether at any point. Once the questionnaire is submitted the data cannot be withdrawn as it is anonymous so there will be no way to identify your data.

This research has been approved by the Dept of Education, University of York Ethics Committee. If you have any questions or complaints about this research please contact the researcher, Jiqiong Sheng (js3180@york.ac.uk) or Chair of the Ethics Committee (education-research-admin@york.ac.uk).

Please continue if you agree with the above information and proceed by clicking on the 'Next' button.

亲爱的参与者，

您已获邀参与我的博士研究项目。在确认参与前，请您认真阅读以下信息：

此研究旨在考察中国留学生（针对研究生授课型）对英国大学里‘学生即是消费者’这一身份的看法和理解。通过完成以下问卷，您将对更好地理解这一包含争议性的身份做出贡献。

请在您方便时完成本问卷，用时大约为 15 分钟。所有数据将以匿名的形式存放在设密的文件夹里，仅对与本研究项目相关的研究人员开放。这些匿名数据将有可能被用于演讲、项目报告和摘要以及做更深的分析和论文发表等。因问卷的匿名性，一旦您同意完成后就不可撤回。

该研究已获得约克大学教育学院的伦理委员会批准。如果您对本研究有任何问题或投诉，请联系研究员盛吉琼 ([js3180@york.ac.uk](mailto:js3180@york.ac.uk)) 或伦理委员会主席 ([education-research-admin@york.ac.uk](mailto:education-research-admin@york.ac.uk))。

如果您同意以上信息，请您按‘下一步’按钮开始参与问卷调查。

## Part 2 Basic Information 基本信息

- Which of these best describes your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary/ third gender

Prefer not to say

您的性别是什么？

男

女

非二元/第三性别

选择不作答

- What is your age?

18-21 Years old

22-25 Years old

26-30 Years old

31Years old +

Prefer not to say

- 您的年龄是在以下哪个区间？

18-21 岁

22-25 岁

26-30 岁

31 岁以上

选择不作答

- Which city are you from?

您来自中国哪个城市呢？

- What is your ethnic group?

您属于哪个民族？

- Have your parents had higher education?

Both had

One of them had

Both had not

Choose not to answer

您的父母受过高等教育吗？

双方都有

一方有

双方都没有

选择不做答

- What university did you attend for your bachelor?

您本科就读于中国哪所大学？

- what is your bachelor's degree in? Please name all if you hold more than one degree.

您本科攻读什么专业？（若修多个学位，请都填写）

- Which university are you attending/did you attend for postgraduate study? Please name all if you did more than one.

您研究生就读英国哪所大学？（若读二硕或多个硕士，请都填写）

- What is your master's degree in? Please name all if you hold more than one degree.

您研究生攻读什么专业？（如果读二硕或多个硕士，请将每个专业都填写）

- Which year will/did you graduate from the postgraduate course?

您(将)于哪年从英国研究生毕业？



- Which of these best describe your source of finance? (Multiple Choice)
  - Scholarship
  - Family support
  - Loan (from a bank or relatives etc.)
  - Personal funding (savings, realisation of real estate etc.)
  - Other (Please specify)
  - Prefer not to say
  
- 以下哪些选项符合描述您到英国读研的资金来源? (多选)
  - 奖学金
  - 家庭支持
  - 雇主
  - 借款 (亲戚朋友、银行等)
  - 个人 (存款、不动产变现等)
  - 其他
  - 选择不作答
  
- What are the top 3 reasons for you to study abroad? (Please write 1,2,3 according to the preference order)
  - To obtain a master's degree
  - To seek overseas student's benefit (Hukou transfer、 tax reduction of buying cars etc.)
  - To experience British Culture
  - To better career prospects
  - For self-improvement
  - Others (Please specify)
  
- 您选择出国留学的主要三大原因是? (请按偏好填写 1、2、3)
  - 取得研究生学位
  - 享受留学生回国福利 (北上广户口、购车减税等)
  - 体验英国文化
  - 为了更好的工作前景

自我提升

其他（请填写）

- What are the top 3 reasons for you choosing England as the study destination? (Please write 1,2,3 according to the preference order)

Good value for money

The education quality

The education reputation

University ranking

It is safer

To experience British culture

People are nice and polite

Other reasons (please specify)

- 您选择英国作为留学目的地的前三大原因？（请按偏好填写 1、2、3）

性价比高

教学质量

教育声望

大学排名

更安全

体验当地文化

当地人文明友好

其他（请填写原因）

- What are the top 3 reasons for you to choose the university you attending/attended? (Please write 1,2,3 according to the preference order)

Its reputation

Its ranking

Its career prospects

Its location

Lower cost

It was the only offer

Someone chose it for me

It is my personal preference

Other reasons (please specify)

- 您选择就读英国该所高校的前三大原因是？（请按偏好填写 1、2、3）

学校声誉

学校排名

就业前景

地理位置

成本更低

唯一的 offer

他人推荐

个人喜好

其他（请填写原因）

- In your opinion, what are the top 3 elements forming good value for money for a postgraduate course? (Please write 1,2,3 according to the preference order)

One year programme

Teachers' intercultural competence

High-quality lecturers and tutors

High number of contact hours

It will directly help my future career

Good interaction with fellow students

High-quality course content

Good facilities available for studying (e.g., library, lab facilities)

It is academically challenging

Other [please specify]

- 您认为英国研究生课程性价比高必须具备以下哪三个要素？（请按偏好填写 1、2、3）

一年学制

教师的跨文化能力  
高质量的讲师和导师  
可长时间和导师互动  
对未来的事业有直接的帮助  
和同学有很好的互动  
高质量的教学内容  
学习设施齐全（比如图书馆、实验室）  
具备学术挑战性  
其他（请具体说明）

### Part 3 Questionnaire Items 问卷题目

Please make your best judgment on the following statements based on your true feelings during your postgraduate studies in the UK.

根据您在英国读研的真实感受，请您对以下陈述做出最贴切的判断。

I think of my postgraduate education as a product I purchased/am purchasing  
我认为我的研究生课程是我购买的一件产品。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

Concerning the University I attend /attended; I think of myself primarily as a customer of the University

对于我就读的大学而言，我认为自己主要是该大学的一名消费者。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

Because I have paid the tuition, the University I attend owe me a degree

因为我付了学费，我就读的学校欠我一个学位。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

For the most part, postgraduate education is something I receive, not something I create

总的来说，我是研究生教育的接收者而非创造者。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

It is part of my professors' job to make sure I pass my courses

大学老师的职责之一是确保我不挂科。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

The financial returns on my postgraduate course are not very important to me

英国读研的经济回报对我而言不是很重要。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career

我只想从课程中学习有利于工作前景的内容。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

If I could get a well-paying job without doing a master's degree in England, I would not be here

如果不用在英国读研就可以找到一份薪资丰厚的工作，我不会选择来英国。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

It is more important for me to have a high paying career than one I really like

一份职业对我而言，收入比兴趣更重要。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

Developing my critical thinking skills is only important if it helps me with my career  
培养批判性思维的唯一重要性是帮助我发展事业。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

For me, university is more of a place to get training for a specific career than to gain a general education

对我来说，大学更像一个培训我进入特定行业而非收获通识教育的地方。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

As long as I complete all of my assignments, I deserve a good grade in a course

只要我完成所有课业考核，我就理应获得一个好的学科成绩。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

For me, it is more important to get a good grade in a course than it is to learn the material

对我而言，获取一个好的学科成绩比学习课程内容重要。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

My professors should round up my final course grade one or two points if I am close to the next letter grade

如果我的最终成绩只差一两分就可以晋升一个学位等级，我的老师们应该给我加上这一两分。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

While attending the master's programme , I try to take the easiest courses possible

在英国读研时，我只想尽量选好过的学科。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

If I cannot get a good job after I graduate from my master's course, I should be able to have some of my tuition and fees refunded

如果研究生毕业后我找不到一份好的工作，大学应该返还部分学费给我。

Agree strongly 强烈同意



Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

I will only major in something that will help me earn a lot of money

我只想选择有利于赚很多钱的专业。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

If I cannot earn a lot of money after I graduate, I will have wasted my time at university in the UK

如果毕业后不能够赚很多钱，在英国上学就浪费了我的时间。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

The main purpose of my postgraduate education should be maximising my ability to earn money

来英国读研的主要目的是最大限度地增加我赚钱的能力。

Agree strongly 强烈同意

Agree 同意

Neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对

Disagree 反对

Disagree strongly 强烈反对

#### Part 4 Identities

1. While you are studying in the UK, which one of these best describe how you view yourself?

International Student

Learner

Academic partner

Consumer

Chinese

Foreigner

Other (Please Specify)

您认为以下哪个身份最适合形容在英国读研的您？

国际生

学习者

学术合作伙伴

消费者

中国人

外国人

其他（请填写）

2. While you are studying in the UK, which one of these best describe how the UK government define you as?

International Student

Learner

Academic partner

Consumer

Chinese

Foreigner

Other (Please Specify)

在英国读研时，您认为英国政府将您定义为以下哪种身份？

- 国际生
- 学习者
- 学术合作伙伴
- 消费者
- 中国人
- 外国人
- 其他（请填写）

3. While you are studying in the UK, which one of these best describe how your institution define you as ?

- International Student
- Learner
- Academic partner
- Consumer
- Chinese
- Foreigner
- Other (Please Specify)

在英国读研时，您认为您所在的大学将您定义为哪种身份？

- 国际生
- 学习者
- 学术合作伙伴
- 消费者
- 中国人
- 外国人
- 其他（请填写）

4. While you are studying in the UK, which one of these best describe how your teachers define you as ?

International Student  
Learner  
Academic partner  
Consumer  
Chinese  
Foreigner  
Other (Please Specify)

在英国读研时，您认为您的老师们将您定义为哪种身份？

国际生  
学习者  
学术合作伙伴  
消费者  
中国人  
外国人  
其他（请填写）

5. While you are studying in the institution, which one of these you prefer not to be identified as?

International Student  
Learner  
Foreigner  
Sojourner  
Consumer  
Other (Please Specify)

在英国大学里，您最不想被以下哪种身份定义？

国际生

学习者  
学术合作伙伴  
消费者  
中国人  
外国人  
其他（请填写）

THE END

Thank you very much for your time and participation!

结束语

感谢您的宝贵时间和参与！

## Appendix B: Interview protocol

### Educational biography and trajectory

- Can you describe your educational trajectory from high school to your postgraduate?
- How do you feel about the transitions from high school to undergrad and from undergrad to postgrad?
- Was Gaokao being successful on your own terms?
- How was your undergraduate? Have you achieved your goals?
- What made you decide to continue postgraduate education?

### Push and Pull factors of studying in England.

- What made you decide to study in the UK?
- Discuss push factors such as the Chinese postgraduate entrance exam, Chinese labour market, the general understanding and recognition of English education.
- Discuss the pull factors such as the importance of English as a teaching medium, the overall values of an English master's degree, and the different lifestyle.

### Expectations and motivations

- Further probe for more information about specific expectations from the PGT?
- What's the difference between motivations for studying undergraduate in China and for studying postgraduate in the UK?
- What makes the different expectations from both sectors?
- Have the expectations and motivations for PGT changed after experienced (completed) it in the UK? If yes, why?

### Satisfaction

- Can you tell me a specific time/moment you feel happy or unhappy with the institution, the teachers or the modules setting during the time you study in the UK?

- If you are dissatisfied, how did you deal with the dissatisfied situation?
- If you are satisfied, what makes you happy? And how important was that factor to you?
- How do you feel if the same situation happened within Chinese undergrad education?

#### Views of teaching and learning

- How do you feel about the teaching and learning within the PGT course?
- Are there any differences between undergraduate and graduate? What makes the difference?
- What sort of relationship do you have with your teachers and tutors?
- What do you consider the lecturer content? Do you consider they are helpful in what way?

#### Challenges and pressures of studying the master's course in the UK

- What kinds of challenges do you face while you are studying?
- How do you cope with it?
- Have you gained support from anyone?
- How do you feel after the pressure is gone?

#### Identities within international education

- What types of identities or labels do you encounter while you study in the UK?
- Can you tell me a little bit more about each of them?
- In the questionnaire, I have provided a few of them: International student, learner, academic partner, consumer, Chinese, foreigner. What's your opinion on these identities?
- Do you associate yourself with other identities in the context of studying PGT in England?

- Within the context of Chinese higher education, what're the best identities you perceive you as?

#### Attitudes toward fees and its impaction

- How do you fund your study in the UK?
- Has the tuition fee affected your thinking about the study experience?
- Have you considered 'paying a fee entitles you something'?

#### Attitudes towards the marketisation and commercialisation of UK higher education

- Have you come across the marketisation of higher education?
- How do you consider the phenomenon?
- Do you consider it positively or negatively? Why?
- How do you consider the impacts of international students on the phenomenon?

#### Future interests and orientations

- What's your plan after graduating from the master's course?
- Do you think the whole experience will add value to your plan? (Which part/element)



## Appendix C: Interview consent form

### Do Chinese Students View Themselves as Consumers of English Universities?

Research Student: Jiqiong Sheng, [js3180@york.ac.uk](mailto:js3180@york.ac.uk)

Supervisors: Dr. Sally Hancock, [sally.hancock@york.ac.uk](mailto:sally.hancock@york.ac.uk); Prof. Paul Wakeling, [paul.wakeling@york.ac.uk](mailto:paul.wakeling@york.ac.uk)

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the information provided carefully and feel free to speak to the researcher or contact her at [js3180@york.ac.uk](mailto:js3180@york.ac.uk) if you would like any more information. Take time to decide whether or not you are happy to take part. Thank you for reading this.

#### Taking Part in the Project

*Please tick the appropriate boxes*

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet, or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you answer No to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been allowed to ask questions about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in being interviewed and being audio recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that a Zoom records video and audio at the same time. I understand that if my webcam is on during the interview, that my video will be recorded alongside audio. I understand that the audio recording will be kept for analysis and any video recording will be deleted after audio has been fully transcribed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

#### How my information will be used during and after the project

I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that other authorised persons (e.g., supervisors) will only have access to this data under the conditions of confidentiality specified in the information documents.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that raw data from the project will be destroyed on completion of the research study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

#### So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers

I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to the researcher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--	--------------------------	--------------------------

Name of participant [printed]

Signature

Date

## **Appendix D: Project information**

### **Do Chinese Students View Themselves as Consumers of English Universities?**

Name and email of the student responsible for the research: Jiqiong Sheng, [js3180@york.ac.uk](mailto:js3180@york.ac.uk)

Academics supervising the work: Professor Paul Wakeling, [paul.wakeling@york.ac.uk](mailto:paul.wakeling@york.ac.uk);

Dr. Sally Hancock, Email address: [sally.hancock@york.ac.uk](mailto:sally.hancock@york.ac.uk)

#### **1. What is the purpose of this project?**

The aim of the project is to explore Chinese students' perceptions of themselves as consumers of higher education in England. In public discussions and government policy in England, students are often represented as consumers who should make rational decisions and demand consumer rights from universities. However, Postgraduate Chinese students who have been educated by a significantly different education system for over 15 years before they embark on an English higher education journey. Therefore, it will be interesting to research their points of view and experiences towards the identity of consumer.

#### **2. Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen as you are/were a Chinese student who completed your undergraduate education in China but studied at postgraduate level in England. Your perceptions and experience are crucial and invaluable to develop the research topic.

#### **3. Do I have to take part?**

The present research is entirely voluntary and whether you participate is exclusively your own decision. If you do not wish to proceed, there will be no consequence for yourself, nor is there a penalty if you do wish to proceed but change your mind later. You are given the right to withdraw at any time during the research process. If you wish to take part, you will be provided with an information sheet detailing key information about the research. You will additionally be asked to sign a consent form.

#### **4. What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?**

We will have a Zoom meeting at your convenience and conduct a one-to-one interview for about 45 minutes. All you need to do is answer my research questions based on your thoughts and experience.

**5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is not expected that there will be any risks or disadvantages of taking part. You may however be asked to discuss your views and attitudes towards the consumerism of UK higher education and the concept of ‘students as consumers’. At no point is this research intending to be judgemental or infer any preference in self-identity; it is hoped that participation will not lead to any offense, feelings of insecurity or questioning of individual’s thinking on consumer behaviours.

**6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there will be no immediate benefits to those taking part, the research topic is very meaningful for students and faculty in the higher education sector and policymakers. To keep having students’ own voice on the social-political discourse and their roles within the sector will be a long-term benefit.

**7. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

If the research study stops earlier than expected you will be informed of when and why this has occurred. You will still have the option to withdraw consent for your data to be used.

**8. What if something goes wrong?**

If you wish to make a complaint or withdraw your consent for participation in the study, you can contact me (Miss Jiqiong Sheng, email: [js3180@york.ac.uk](mailto:js3180@york.ac.uk)) in the first instance. Or you can inform my supervisor (Professor Paul Wakeling, email: [paul.wakeling@york.ac.uk](mailto:paul.wakeling@york.ac.uk)) if you do not wish to disclose the information to myself.

**9. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All of the information collected will be kept strictly confidential. No one will be identified throughout the analysis of my field notes. Codes will be given where appropriate, e.g. names or any specific information that might give away identities ensuring anonymity.

**10. What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?**

This data will be stored and processed in the United Kingdom by the researcher conducting this study. Therefore, according to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that ‘Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller’ (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University’s

lawful basis for processing personal data <https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/dp/guidance/determiningthepurpose/>. No data will be transferred outside of the EU.

**11. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

These results will form part of my thesis, potentially presented in conferences and publications.

**12. Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved by a panel of reviewers at the University of York Department of Education. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

**13. Will I be audio or video-recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

Yes, to help me better understand and continue the work after the interviews, audio-recording will be conducted during the interview. If you are happy for your webcam to be switched on during the interview, video will also be recorded. However only the audio recording will be kept (any video recording will be deleted). Any audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used for analysis and for illustration in my project and may be used in presentations, online, in research reports and summaries or similar. All contributions will be anonymous. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

**14. Who is the Data Controller?**

The University of York will act as the data controller for this study. This means that The University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

If there is concern about any aspect of this research project it should be addressed in the first instance to me: Miss Jiqiong Sheng, email: [js3180@york.ac.uk](mailto:js3180@york.ac.uk). Or you can inform my supervisor: Professor Paul Wakeling, email: [paul.wakeling@york.ac.uk](mailto:paul.wakeling@york.ac.uk).

\*\*\*\*\*

*Thank you for considering participating in this study.*

## Appendix E: Participants recruitment posts

### Post 1


#### 读博日常 | 招募问卷调研试验人员

嗨，大家本周过得怎么样？

我着实被 SPSS 搞得想放弃 MMR，谢谢好几个小伙伴提供建议和学习材料分享！感动！

在着手进行学习 SPSS 的过程中，我需要做问卷的 Pilot Study。在小红书这一年第一次为自己的研究发个广告吧。

 问卷调查表试验

 需要 5 名在英国读硕士的或者已经硕士毕业的同学

 时间和内容安排：

Zoom 或者 WeChat video call

15 分钟做问卷

15 分钟聊反馈（就是这个问卷你做了觉得怎么样？有什么需要修改的吗？）

15 分钟聊聊关于英国学习生活，也可以问我硕博的问题等（不是必要环节哈，看大家意愿）

✨ 问卷的内容主要就是在英国读研的一些感受，比较贴近大家的学习状态，没有任何高深的问题。

❤️ 如果你愿意拨出一点时间帮忙，然后顺带认识我还有其他几个小伙伴，请私信我哈！谢谢 ❤️

#留学英国 #英国读研 #英国生活

 说点什么...



## **English translation:**

### **PhD daily life | Recruiting participants for the pilot study of the questionnaire**

Hi, how's everyone doing this week?

I'm really tempted to give up on MMR because of SPSS, thanks to the advice and study materials shared by several of you! I'm quite touched!

In the process of learning SPSS, I need to do a Pilot Study of the questionnaire, and I'm advertising my research for the first time this year.

### **Questionnaire Pilot Study**

5 people who are doing a master's degree in the UK or have already graduated with a master's degree

### **Duration and content:**

Zoom or WeChat video call

15 minutes for the questionnaire

15 minutes to discuss your feedback (what do you think of the questionnaire? Is there anything considered to be modified of this questionnaire?)

15 minutes to talk about the study life in the UK, you can also ask me questions about postgraduation and PhD (this is not a necessary part, and it depends on you)

The content of the questionnaire is mainly about your perception of the postgraduate study in the UK, which is closer to your study condition. No tough questions.

If you are willing to spare some time to help me out and get to know me and some other friends, please message me! Thank you!

#Study in the UK #Postgraduate UK #Life in the UK

#PhD daily life #PhD study in the UK #PhD diary

#Essay on study abroad #Questionnaire #Questionnaire sample

## 研究招募 | 英国研究生

嗨大家周一好!

经过好几个月的准备工作，我总算可以开始收集数据了!! 我的研究主要通过问卷调查和深度访谈两种形式。在此面向小红书的英国留学生们招募参与者:

(恳请帮帮忙❤️)

! 研究主题围绕英国高校市场化的现象及“学生即消费者”身份的探讨

! 参与对象需要符合以下两个条件:

✓ 在中国完成本科

✓ 在英国 (England) 完成或者在读授课型研究生

👤 问卷调查

1 问卷时长: 10-15 分钟

(参加试样的小伙伴均认为比一般问卷短, 也比自己预期的内容来得少)

2 数量: 1000 份

👤 深度访谈

1 时常: 45 分钟至 1 小时一对一交谈

2 数量: 35 个小伙伴

3 内容: 在英国读研的一些感受以及对学校、课程及老师的一些看法

✍ 说点什么...



❤️ 参与方式：

1 你看到此贴后私信我一下，看是要帮忙填问卷或者是一对一访谈，我发链接给你哈。

2 请谅解我发私信给你哈，因为问卷需要的数量太多，我不主动联系大家的话，估计不能按时收集到数据也就毕不了业了😭

❤️ 我保证问卷和访谈内容有趣和大家相关度高，希望大家抽点时间帮帮忙。然后我也会尽力解答大家对英国硕博留学的各种问题哈。

#英国 #英国研究生 #留学英国 #英国论文  
#英国毕业论文 #英国博士申请  
#英国读研 #英国读博  
#英国 G5 留学 #英国研究生毕业

2021-11-29 14:06

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Comment 67 Likes&Collects 31

English translation:

Research Recruitment | UK Postgraduates

Hi everyone, happy Monday!

After months of preparation, I'm finally ready to start collecting data!!! My research is mainly through both questionnaires and in-depth interviews. I'm recruiting participants who are UK international students from the Little Red Book:



(Please help me)

The theme of my study focuses on the marketisation of UK universities and the discussion of the identity of “student as consumer”.

**Participants are required to meet the following two criteria:**

They have completed their undergraduate degree in China

They completed or are doing a master’s degree in the UK

**Questionnaire**

1. Questionnaire duration: 10-15 minutes

(The sample participants agreed that it was shorter than the average questionnaires and less contents than they expected)

2. Quantity: 1000

**In-depth interview**

1. Duration: 45 minutes to 1 hour of one-on-one interview

2. Number: 35 people

3. Content: experience of studying in the UK as a postgraduate student and the perception of the universities and teachers etc.

**How to participate:**

1. Please message me after reading this post. You can either do the questionnaire or one-on-one interview or both, it’s up to you.

2. Please kindly understand that I will have to DM you directly about the link and further information if you agree to participate. Sorry for the interruption. Without your help, I may not be able to graduate if data collection cannot be completed on time.

I consider that the content of the questionnaire and interview interesting and relevant to your studies, so I hope you will take some time to help. I will try my best to answer all your questions about studying in the UK if you have some.

#UK #UK postgraduate #Study in the UK #Essay in the UK

#UK dissertation #UK PhD application

#Postgraduate study in the UK #PhD study in the UK  
# Study in UK G5 #UK postgraduate graduation

## Appendix F: Survey pilot study form and feedback summary

1. How long did the questionnaire take participants to complete?

All seven participants complete the questionnaire within 15 minutes.

2. The length of the questionnaire

All the participants expected a longer questionnaire. Five of them commented that it is a bonus to help someone fill in a questionnaire, and it is short and straightforward.

3. The clarity

Overall, they considered it clear and easy to understand the questions. However, three of them asked to clarify one specific question:

‘For the most part, postgraduate education is something I receive, not something I create.’

One of them suggested adding notes on it to explain the question.

4. The structure and format

Three of them used phones to complete the questionnaire, while the rest of the four used laptops. All of them were happy with the structure. They could read and fill in the questionnaire quickly.

One of them suggested that I change the format on the 5 Likert scale. She said that all the questions corresponding to five choices would be easy to complete instead of each question having the five points choices.

5. Any difficulties completing the questionnaires

All the participants wanted to talk more about the last two questions. They struggle to make decisions on ‘consumer’ and ‘foreigner’.

All of them associate ‘foreigner’ with ‘discrimination’ and ‘exclusivity.’

They had fascinating insights into the ‘consumer’ identity.

## Appendix G: Interview participants demographics

No	Name	Age Range	Gender	PGT Uni. Group	PG Major Subject Area	Graduation Year	UG Uni. Group	UG Major Subject Area	City	City Tier
1	Wang	31-35	Female	Russell Group	Business & administrative studies	2013	Project 211	Languages	An Qing	Tier 3
2	Li	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Engineering & technology	2021	Project 985 & 211	Physical Sciences	Nanjing	New Tier 1
3	Ying	22-25	Female	Neither	Architecture, building & planning	2022	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Shanghai	Tier 1
4	Kong	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Education	2021	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Nanjing	New Tier 1
5	Zong	22-25	Female	Neither	Business & administrative studies	2022	Neither	Creative arts & design	Lanzhou	Tier 3
6	Bai	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Creative arts & design	2022	Neither	Education	Foshan	Tier 2
7	Liang	26-30	Female	Russell Group	Education	2022	Neither	Languages	Shanghai	Tier 1
8	Ma	26-30	Female	Golden Triangle	Languages	2017	Neither	Languages	Wuhan	New Tier 1
9	Lu	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Education	2021	Project 211	Languages	Wulumuqi	Tier 2
10	Guan	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Combined	2022	Project 211	Education	Taipei	Not Included
11	You	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Education	2022	Neither	Mass communications & documentation	Chongqing	New Tier 1
12	Xu	22-25	Female	Golden Triangle	Education	2021	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Bingzhou	Tier 3

13	Yan	22-25	Male	Russell Group	Physical Sciences	2020	Project 211	Physical Sciences	Hefei	Tier 2
14	Yu	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Combined	2021	Neither	Languages	Xi'an	New Tier 1
15	Fu	26-30	Female	Golden Triangle	Education	2022	Neither	Biological sciences	Shenzhen	Tier 1
16	Peng	26-30	Female	Russell Group	Mass communication s & documentation	2022	Project 985 & 211	Medicine & dentistry	Shihezi	Tier 3
17	Pan	26-30	Female	Russell Group	Architecture, building & planning	2022	Neither	Combined	Shenzhen	Tier 1
18	Xie	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Creative arts & design	2021	Project 985 & 211	Creative arts & design	Xiamen	Tier 2
19	Qin	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Social studies	2022	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Chengdu	New Tier 1
20	Sun	22-25	Female	Neither	Languages	2014	Neither	Languages	Beijing	Tier 1
21	Gu	26-30	Female	Russell Group	Creative arts & design	2022	Neither	Languages	Beijing	Tier 1
22	Shen	22-25	Male	Neither	Business & administrative studies	2021	Project 211	Social studies	Zhuhai	Tier 2
23	Ni	22-25	Female	Neither	Social studies	2022	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Shenyang	New Tier 1
24	Dai	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Education	2022	Neither	Education	Tangshan	Tier 3
25	Qu	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Business & administrative studies	2020	Neither	Social studies	Chongqing	New Tier 1
26	Du	22-25	Female	Golden Triangle	Historical & philosophical studies	2021	Project 985 & 211	Architecture, building & planning	Changsha	New Tier 1

27	Y Ke	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Social studies	2022	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Zhanjiang	Tier 3
28	Wan	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Business & administrative studies	2021	Project 985 & 211	Business & administrative studies	Weifang	Tier 3
29	Ye	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Creative arts & design	2022	Neither	Creative arts & design	Xi'an	New Tier 1
30	Wu	22-25	Female	Golden Triangle	Social studies	2022	Project 985 & 211	Social studies	Wulumuqi	Tier 2
31	Hua	26-30	Female	Russell Group	Education	2022	Neither	Creative arts & design	Zhengzhou	New Tier 1
32	Su	22-25	Female	Neither	Engineering & technology	2022	Project 985 & 211	Creative arts & design	Beijing	Tier 1
33	Ji	22-25	Male	Neither	Engineering & technology	2022	Neither	Creative arts & design	Chengdu	New Tier 1
34	He	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Education	2022	Project 985 & 211	Languages	Gangzhou	Tier 3
35	Chu	22-25	Male	Neither	Business & administrative studies	2022	Neither	Combined	Luoyang	Tier 3
36	Lan	26-30	Female	Russell Group	Social studies	2018	Project 211	Mass communications & documentation	Xiamen	Tier 2
37	Lin	22-25	Male	Russell Group	Business & administrative studies	2022	Project 211	Business & administrative studies	Shanghai	Tier 1
38	Xia	22-25	Male	Golden Triangle	Social studies	2022	Neither	Medicine & dentistry	Zhaoqing	Tier 3
39	Tong	26-30	Female	Russell Group	Business & administrative studies	2019	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Kunming	Tier 2
40	Luo	22-25	Male	Golden Triangle	Languages	2022	Neither	Education	Qingdao	New Tier 1
41	Bao	22-25	Male		Social studies	2022	Neither		Zhoushan	Tier 3

				Golden Triangle				Business & administrative studies		
42	Fang	26-30	Female		Education	1 <sup>st</sup> 2020	Neither	Languages	Dalian	New Tier 1
				Russell Group	Education	2 <sup>nd</sup> 2021				
43	Wei	26-30	Female		Business & administrative studies	1 <sup>st</sup> : 2016	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Beijing	Tier 1
				Neither	Business & administrative studies	2 <sup>nd</sup> 2021				
44	Cai	22-25	Female		Law	1 <sup>st</sup> : 2021	Project 211	Combined	Beijing	Tier 1
				Golden Triangle	Combined	2 <sup>nd</sup> : 2021				
45	Ren	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Subjects allied to medicine	2022	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Guangzhou	Tier 1
46	Hua	22-25	Male	Russell Group	Agriculture & related subjects	1 <sup>st</sup> 2021	Neither	Agriculture & related subjects	Yaan	Tier 3
				Golden Triangle	Social studies	2 <sup>nd</sup> 2022				
47	Cao	22-25	Male	Russell Group	Education	2022	Neither	Business & administrative studies	Changsha	New Tier 1
48	Xiong	22-25	Female	Russell Group	Education	2022	Neither	Languages	Chengdu	New Tier 1
49	Jiang	22-25	Male	Russell Group	Engineering & technology	2022	Neither	Engineering & technology	Beijing	Tier 1
50	Gao	26-30	Male	Neither	Languages	2019	Neither	Languages	Guangzhou	Tier 1
51	Yang	31-35	Male	Russell Group	Engineering & technology	2010	Neither	Engineering & technology	Jinhua	Tier 2

## Appendix H: Two examples of advertisement from the ‘international student industry’





## Appendix I: Abbreviations

Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS)  
ASEA University Network (AUN)  
Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN)  
Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)  
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS)  
Department of Education and Science (DfES)  
English Language Test System (IELTS)  
European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)  
European Economic Area (EEA)  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)  
Gross Tertiary Enrolment Rate (GTER)  
HE Age Participation (API)  
HE Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR)  
Higher Education (HE)  
Higher Education Institutes (HEIs)  
International Education Strategy (IES)  
International Ranking Expert Group (IREG)  
National Student Survey (NSS)  
National Student Survey (NSS)  
Office for Student (OfS)  
Postgraduate (PG)  
Postgraduate Entrance Exam (PGEE)  
Postgraduate taught (PGT)  
Post-Study Work (PSW)  
Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI)  
Quality Assurance (QA)  
Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)  
Research Excellence Framework (REF)  
Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths (STEM)  
Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)  
Undergraduate (UG)  
UK Border Agency (UKBA)  
UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI)

UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES)

University Grants Committee (UGC)