The Academic Experiences of International Students Studying in Chinese Higher Education

A Case Study

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http://www.duo.uio.no/

Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo
Abstract

In the past decade, the number of international students in China has constantly grown, with an especially rapid rise in the number of students who are entering degree programs. Confronting such a surge in the number of international students, Chinese universities have needed to rise to the occasion. This thesis takes international postgraduate students in China as the study objects, examining the challenges these students face when they try to integrate into Chinese academic environment, the support that Chinese universities provide for them to facilitate their academic adaptation, and students’ perceptions of these supports. The findings revealed that language barriers, heavy workloads, a lack of basic knowledge in some subjects, stresses related to taking written exams, and little opportunity for interactions with domestic students are the main academic challenges that international postgraduate students face during their adjustment to a new educational context in China. Corresponding to these academic challenges, Chinese universities provide many supporting practices, including English-instructed programs, diverse forms of language training, academic writing courses, advanced technological and digital services, various academic activities and associations, and many others. Among all of these support activities, there are some aspects expected by the international postgraduate students to be improved, mainly offering English instruction for information and technology, focusing more on their concerns and demands, adjusting workloads, enhancing their Chinese proficiency, and preparing them with particular subject knowledge for graduate studies, as well as building connections and interactions with Chinese students.
Acknowledgements

Along with several times of changes in the research direction, the occupation of time by part-time to finance the extension of study, and the obstacles in the data collection, my thesis finally approaches to the end.

Looking back on the whole process, the pressure it caused was surely huge enough to be ranked in the top three in my life. Ironically, my study is investigating the academic challenges of international students in the Chinese higher education, however, as an international student who is from China and studying abroad, compared with these counterparts I interviewed in the field work of my study, the academic challenges I have encountered in the past three years are even more overwhelming. For example, merely the struggles of writing this master’s thesis could be considered as possible to provide sufficient data for a new research. At this point, I would like to give my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Peter Maassen, for his great support and kind help, from patiently giving guidance on logic structure, theoretical framework and research methods of my study, to carefully reviewing and modifying my written English. In addition, the frequent discussions and communications with senior students and my cohorts are also a great input to my thesis writing. Apart from sharing beneficial research experiences, it also allowed me to constantly develop new ideas and make self-reflection. Recruiting research participants was one of the biggest difficulties while conducting this research. Fortunately, I was able to find enough interviewees successfully in the end, with the help of some of my old friends and colleagues, to whom I am full of gratitude. Last but not least, I should like to extend my grateful thanks to all the volunteer interviewees. Without their valuable information and precious contribution, it is certainly impossible to complete this thesis.

In the beginning of 2020, an outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic began in my home country and spread to the whole world afterwards. During this final sprinting period of
my study, I should have been concentrating on thesis without concerning anything else surrounding, however, my emotions were inevitably affected. I could not help from worrying about the safety and health of my families and friends. When I see the medical workers who are fighting in the front line and the patients who are struggling with the disease, I feel terribly sorry for not being able to do anything for them. Eventually, I adjusted myself and focused again on my thesis writing. On the other side, due to the pandemic, all the people are grounded at home, which gave me more isolated time to work on my thesis without social activities and other distractions.

It is unknown whether this paper is the last piece of my academic work, but obviously it is the one to which I have dedicated the most time and energy so far. While far from being called an outstanding scholar, I am still gratified and satisfied with the academic thinking and scientific research attitude I have cultivated in the process of working on this study. Finally, many thanks to myself, my family, and everyone who is cheering for me when I am running on the journey for knowledge.

Long and far road as it is, I will search high and low to pursue the truth! ------ “Li Sao”, Qu Yuan (The Warring States Period)
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ANT</td>
<td>Actor-Network Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNKI</td>
<td>China National Knowledge Infrastructure</td>
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<tr>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>Corona Virus Disease 2019</td>
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<td>HSK</td>
<td>Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (a Chinese language proficiency test)</td>
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<td>IELTS</td>
<td>International English Language Testing System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIE</td>
<td>Institute of International Education</td>
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<td>ISD</td>
<td>International Student Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
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<td>L2</td>
<td>Learning Chinese as a second language</td>
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<td>MIS</td>
<td>Management Information Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIR</td>
<td>Office of International Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q&amp;A</td>
<td>Question and Answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNS</td>
<td>Social Network Site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOEFL</td>
<td>Test of English as a Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UiO</td>
<td>University of Oslo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VLEs</td>
<td>Virtual Learning Environments</td>
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<td>VPN</td>
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Following the global trend, internationalization has been increasingly emphasized by Chinese universities in the past decade. Especially after an overall guidance document “Suggestions on Opening of Education in the New Period” (2016) released by the Chinese government in 2016, internationalization has been given high priority when universities set their strategies. In the process of internationalization, international students play an important role because they contribute to creating a cross-cultural and diverse learning environment in their host universities, which is assumed to benefit the development of both themselves and domestic students (Knight, 2012). As a result, apart from several traditional exporters of international education services, such as the United States (US), Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and Germany, China has also started engaging in what might best be described as a “global competition” for international students at the end of the first decade in the new millennium (Wildavsky, 2010). Efforts have been made by both the state and individual institutions, ranging from national policies and diplomatic relations, to institutional governance and management, enrollment strategies and channels, financial supports, etc. At the same time, other approaches, like making the Chinese Quality Assurance System more coherent with global standards (Liu, 2009), increasing English-instructed subjects and programs, and internationalizing disciplines and majors (Chen & Tian, 2014), have been implemented in practice to some extent. According to Project Atlas\(^1\) conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE), China has moved from the leading sending country for international students to one of the top 10 host countries since 2009, and became the third since 2014. In 2017, China had a 10% share of global international students, only slightly behind the UK with 11% in second place. Figure 1 shows the enrollment of international students in Chinese universities from 2009 to 2017. We can

\(^1\) [http://www.iie.org/projectatlas](http://www.iie.org/projectatlas)
see that the number of international students has constantly grown, despite the lower annual growth rate during the period 2013 – 2015. Among all international students, the percentage of students who are taking degree programs, remained relatively stable before 2014, while it experienced a rapid rise afterwards and reached almost 50% in 2017, with the average annual growth of around 15% in three years. In addition, the absolute number of international degree students tripled comparing with 10 years ago. The rest are students taking short-term programs, such as learning Chinese as a second language (L2), summer school and exchange programs (either subject courses or language training) through cooperation agreements with foreign universities.

**Figure 1**: Enrollment of international students in Chinese universities in 2009–2017

Many reasons could be addressed to explain why the number of international students choosing to study in China instead of other countries is increasing. The main factors that drive a country to become more attractive to international students can be referred to as the “pull” factors involved in the decision-making of studying overseas (Mazzarol

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2 Data source: Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (MOE) ([http://www.moe.gov.cn](http://www.moe.gov.cn))
and Soutar 2002). First of all, China has been gradually well-known to the global population owing to the economic development and cultural promotion, corresponding with the factor of “overall level of knowledge and awareness of the host country” as defined by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002, p.84). Secondly, the living costs are relatively low plus more and more scholarships/financial assistances are provided to international students resulting from the political agendas and strategies as mentioned before. This reflects the factor of “cost issues” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p.84). Also, the country has the advantage of “geographic proximity” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p.84) to the largest potential entrants – Asian students.

1.2 Significance of the study

Given that the rapid growth of international students is a new experience for Chinese higher education, how Chinese universities deal with the dramatic increase is an important but obviously not an easy question after all, as in any context with the same situation. In other words, the rapid rise of the number of international students is an unexpected phenomenon that takes place in China — a new mass higher education system itself. Therefore, it is significant to get a better understanding on how Chinese higher education, as it is becoming one of the major suppliers to global students, is handling the dramatic increase in international students as a specific aspect of internationalization.

It must be noted, however, that there are many differences between international degree and short-term students in terms of various dimensions of their experiences. For example, exchange students are more likely to be motivated to study abroad by the expected benefits of developing cross-cultural skills (e.g. multicultural communication and collaboration, language skills, etc.), promotion from both home and host institutions, financial support under cooperation agreements, recommendations from previous students, as well as the opportunity of travelling abroad (Muntasira, Jiang, & Thuy, 2009). Thus, academic outcomes might not be their first priority. Similarly,
acquiring a second language is the primary goal for L2 students who are relatively isolated from the academic activities of Chinese higher education since most of them are not admitted to any degree programs. In contrast, for international degree students, meeting the academic demands and achievements of particular programs and obtaining a higher educational degree in the host university are the main purposes (Ward & Furnham, 2001; Young & Schartner, 2014), no matter what factors affected their choices in the first place. Hence, the academic experiences are essential and indispensable when it comes to understanding international degree students.

Furthermore, it is also necessary to distinguish between international undergraduate and postgraduate students because the academic adjustment experiences of them differ significantly or in more subtle ways (Quan, He, & Sloan, 2016, p.327). For instance, postgraduate students hold distinct “attitudes towards academic expectation and university services” (Arambewela & Hall, 2013, as cited in Quan et al., 2016, p. 332), and have to experience that “the transition to becoming a research student involves a change, a new way of being, or a becoming of something else—invoked in part by the re-situation challenges” (Franken, 2012, p.848). As a result, although international degree students are unique as a group, it is necessary to distinguish between different types of students when investigating their varying experiences (Wekullo, 2019, p.321). In addition, host institutions should take this heterogeneity into consideration and develop separate supporting strategies that are contingent on the diverse needs of their international students.

Based on the above considerations, the current study attempts to analyze the academic experiences of international postgraduate students in China and relates these experiences to the support capacity of universities, with the aim to increase our understanding of the extent to which the Chinese universities are fully prepared for providing international education in an appropriate way. The reason for solely targeting postgraduate students is that it is assumed that they are more directly linked up with academic activities than undergraduates in several aspects. Firstly, postgraduate
students are mature enough to be better able to deal with non-academic challenges themselves. Moreover, a student who has experienced higher education and obtained a degree is perhaps more inclined to make the decision of studying abroad for academic reasons.

Specifically, this study examines the challenges that international postgraduate students face while adjusting to a new academic environment in Chinese universities, on the one hand, as well as the supporting activities that universities have introduced to facilitate the academic adaptation of international postgraduate students and how they work in practice on the other hand. The main objectives in this are to discover the existing problems and weaknesses, deliver valuable information and propose meaningful suggestions for Chinese universities to improve the academic experiences of international students. Based on the above considerations, the research questions of the study are formulated as follows:

1. What are the main academic challenges that international postgraduate students face in the adjustment to a new educational context in China?

2. What supporting practices do Chinese universities provide in responding to the academic challenges that international postgraduate students face?

3. How do international postgraduate students perceive the supporting practices provided by Chinese universities for their academic adaptation?

Initially, the study intended to include the perspectives of both international students and the university support structures for the purpose of exploring the relations between the two. The original plan was to conduct interviews with various groups of international postgraduate students, as well as the administrators who are in charge of affairs of international students in one specific Chinese university (P University). However, after connecting with the case university, owing to the increasing sensitivity with respect to the issues of international students in the Chinese circumstances, interviews with the administrators turned out impossible to be undertaken. At the same
time, getting in touch with potential student interviewees through assistance from the administrative offices also became infeasible, plus the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) happened earlier in the host country, leading to great obstacles in recruiting the aimed at number and types of representative participants.

Therefore, the core design with respect to the interviews has been adapted on the basis of the practical challenges that I experienced during my empirical work. I canceled the interviews with the administrators, and have managed to interview a group of international postgraduate students from one English-taught program and three additional international students from different Chinese-taught programs in the case university. This is only a part of the overall original design, but the students’ interviews have provided valid and valuable data as foundation for an in-depth analysis of the students’ challenges and perceptions of the relevant university support structures in the academic area. In terms of research question 2, since I was not able to use the data from interviews with administrators, I decided to rely on written sources. As a consequence, I focused on documents, materials and texts related to the practices of institutional supports established for international degree students and publicly announced by the case university, which still could give rich insights into the supporting practices. In the meanwhile, the experiences of students also allowed me to discuss the practices of academic support, and further analyze whether the supporting practices fit the demands and needs of students or not. To sum up, the data I have collected make it possible to answer my research questions. More details about adjustments of the research design in dealing with the unforeseen challenges experienced in the fieldwork will be explicitly presented in the methodology chapter.

1.3 Empirical setting

Definitions of international students vary across countries and regions, and in China students are considered to be international if they bear a passport from another country (Deardorff, Wit, Heyl, & Adams, 2012, p.4), no matter how long they have been in the
country and what program(s) they study. Unlike many traditional destinations for studying abroad where the majority of students is participating in degree-length programs, Chinese universities were traditionally highly attractive to short-term mobility rather than degree mobility (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011). The current trend of a rapid growth of international degree students in Chinese higher education is not a balanced phenomenon emerging everywhere. Instead, the number of international degree students at some top universities in Beijing, Shanghai and several provinces located on the eastern area (e.g. Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shandong, etc.) is growing much faster than elsewhere owing to their reputations, resources, and advantages in hosting a complete range of disciplines (Liu & Liu, 2016, p.95).

The university which is selected as the case for the current study is one of the leading universities in terms of internationalization in China. It has experienced a rapid increase of the number of international degree students over the last 10 years, reaching 7.74% of its total student numbers in 2017 (P University, 2017, n.d.). Among all departments, the department of international relations has the largest population of international students because it provides most English programs, followed by Chinese language and literature, which offers only Mandarin-instructed programs (P University, 2017, n.d.). Corresponding to the large size of the group of international degree students, there is a separate office in the International Student Division (ISD) specially established for long-term programs on campus, taking administrative affairs and providing assistance to international degree students. Nevertheless, the academic support to international degree students is supposed to be the responsibility of departments rather than the central administrative office. Whether academic activities and standards for international students should be completely the same as for the Chinese students or whether they should get special arrangements depends on each department itself.

In general, the length of master’s programs in China is two years (professional master degree) to three years (academic master degree) (Degree students | International Student Division, P University, n.d.). However, the case university was found to have
initiated one-year master’s programs especially for international students, such as the Master Program in Public Policy that half of the participants in this study are enrolled in. In addition, some master’s programs set up different study periods for international and domestic students. For example, in the major of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language the (nominal) length of study is three years for Chinese students while two years for international students.

Speaking of the origins of students, Asia and Europe have provided for many years most students to both the case university and the Chinese higher education system as a whole. For example, according to MOE\(^3\), in 2016, about 60% of international students studying in China were from Asian countries and 16.11% from European countries. Among all international students, Korean students have constantly made up the largest national group, despite of the slow growth in the last few years. One of the reasons for the highest rank on the number of Korean students in the case university could be ascribed to a special undergraduate enrollment process for the international students who received high school education in China, which probably exists in many other Chinese universities as well. Because of geographical adjacency and strong interdependence between the two countries, many Korean students have been studying in China even since primary school. They can be easily admitted into undergraduate programs via the special examination, which is much easier than Chinese Gaokao (National higher education entrance examination for mainland Chinese students). This unique phenomenon somewhat leads to an unbalanced distribution in the nationalities of the enrolled international undergraduate students, which offers another rationale for the preference of postgraduate international students in this study.

1.4 Outline

Chapter 1 describes the problem that the Chinese higher education has in recent years caused by the significant increase on the number of international students, especially

\(^3\)http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/xw_fjb/moe_2069/xwfbh_2017n/xwfb_170301/170301_sjtj/201703n20170301_297677.html
the growth of degree students. Consequently, it addresses the significance of understanding the measures that the Chinese universities take to deal with the identified problem through exploring the academic challenges of international postgraduate students while examining the institutional support responding to these challenges, thus, the main research questions of the study. It also introduces the empirical setting to clarify the research context and rationalize the selection of the targeted research objects.

Chapter 2 reviews an amount of literature that investigated the academic challenges of international students both in China and other countries, according to which a classification of the major challenges that international students faced in their adjustment into a new foreign academic environment is generated. Besides, it reviews many studies with respect to the supporting practices and services offered by the host universities, and related them to each category of the academic challenges. In addition, a number of theories used to facilitate developing theoretical and analytical frameworks of the identified academic challenges and institutional support are included in this chapter too.

Chapter 3 illustrates the frameworks for examining the academic challenges of international students with various indicators created on the basis of the previous literature and relevant theories. The second part of this chapter focuses on the framework built upon the Scott’s (2004) institutional theory of three pillars, which comprises the elements of supporting structure to the academic challenges from regulative, normative and cognitive level.

Chapter 4 firstly states the research design and the methodological rationale of the study, and then explicates the challenges that I experienced in the field work, and how I dealt with the unexpected circumstances. Moreover, it discusses the reason of adopting qualitative interviews for data collection, the sampling strategies, and the validity and ethical issues. Finally, it demonstrates the steps of data analysis process and the analytical framework for interpreting the findings.
Both chapter 5 and 6 present the results of data analysis. The chapter of findings describes detailed information about the academic challenges offered by the student interviewees, and the corresponding supporting practices found from both interviews and documents in the light with the identified five categories of academic challenges. Chapter 6 goes further into the patterns and relationships between the various aspect of academic experiences and supporting practices extracted from the collected data. Apart from this, some suggestions on the development of institutional support are provided to the host universities.

The final chapter explicitly returns to the research questions, providing answers to them based on the collected data and the outcomes of analysis. Furthermore, it makes a few reflections and implications in terms of the initial research problem and relevant issues, exhibits the limitations of the study and suggests some recommendations to further research on the same topic.
2 Literature review

Generally speaking, under the impact of globalization and the increasing importance of international student recruitment, research on international students is a growth area, not only in developed English-speaking countries, but also increasingly in developing economies (Tight, 2012, p.95). The former can be traced back at least to the 1980s, whereas the latter, as in China, has developed lately and expanded slowly in the international arena of academia (An & Chiang, 2015, p.662). In previous studies regarding international student experiences in Chinese universities, L2 learners attracted much attention as they accounted for the vast majority of international students (e.g. Yu, 2010), and sociocultural adaptation was in a dominant position (e.g. An & Chiang, 2015). However, there seems be a void in the specific area of academic adaptation of international degree students in Chinese higher education research, which is the main focus of this study. Moreover, Tight (2012) summarized that among the major themes investigated in the dominant western countries were “the experiences and needs of international students, and how universities and their staff should adjust and adapt their provision to address them” (Asmar, 2005; Campbell, 2000; as cited in Tight, 2012, p. 95). Very little about these themes is known in the Chinese context. That being said, researchers in China always appeal for more emphasis on assisting international students from institutions (e.g. Liu, 2009; Jiang, 2015; Chen & Tian, 2014), which forms the research angle for this study emphasizing the institutional support to the adaptation of international students in Chinese higher education.

For international students, it is inevitably difficult to adapt to the cultural differences as sojourners in the host country. “An individual might experience an identity crisis in the process of cultural transformation, when he/she is making a transition from one culture to another” (Jibreel, 2015, p.8). International students could also get emotional stress originating from homesickness and loneliness, or feel being isolated owing to limited social networks (Roberts, Dunworth, & Boldy, 2018, p. 22), which will further influence their academic performance or even cause physical or psychological
problems. Nevertheless, as students who are taking degree programs are more involved in academic activities, “while facing the most common problems such as communication difficulties and loneliness like all the cross-cultural travelers” (An & Chiang, 2015, p. 663), they must encounter a multitude of academic challenges. The current study tries to categorize the main academic challenges that international students in Chinese universities face and recapitulate some supporting practices that universities introduced in responding to these challenges through reviewing relevant literature.

2.1 Challenge of language proficiency

Firstly, a lack of language proficiency is considered by all researchers as one of the key factors that causes academic challenges for international students. Although language difficulties create troubles for international students in all facets of adaptation, “they pose a greater challenge in their academic or professional performance” (An & Chiang, 2015, p. 663). As we all know, international degree students usually have to prove their language capability to be enrolled into a foreign university, like obtaining certain scores in an IELTS or TOEFL test if they plan to study in an English-medium university or study program. Obviously, meeting the required standards of a language test does not equal to the ability to use the language in academic studies and work (Franken, 2012; Kuo, 2011). It is widely reflected in prior studies that language barriers create massive obstacles for the academic engagement of international students. According to the findings of these studies, the main challenges as regards language ability include problematic communication with faculty and peers (Elliot, Reid, & Baumfield, 2016; Wekullo, 2019; Freeman & Li, 2019), and troubles in reading literature and understanding lectures (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Young & Schartner, 2014; Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016). It is argued that these challenges generally result in the inactive participation to enquiries and discussions in classes and seminars (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Wekullo, 2019; Freeman & Li, 2019), as well as fears of oral exams and presentations (Wekullo, 2019).
Similar results were revealed in studies about international students’ experiences in Chinese universities. Although international students passed HSK (a Chinese language proficiency test) exams, they were not able to really use the language in their studies or in doing research (Liu, 2017, p.29). According to the results of a survey among international postgraduates in 91 Chinese universities, approximate 80% of the students reported that the Chinese language was the biggest problem during their studying in China (Liu, 2017, p.29). A particular situation for many international postgraduate students in Chinese universities is that they have a choice of taking all courses in English instead of Chinese (An & Chiang, 2015, p. 665), implying that the Chinese language is not necessarily a requirement if the program is instructed in English. However, there is still a possibility that understanding and communication problems exist if the instructors and peers are non-native English speakers.

There are several studies particularly focused on the specific components of the language challenges encountered by international students. Kuo (2011) revealed that listening comprehension and oral proficiency were the major problems of international graduate students at a Southern university in the US (p.39), and further demonstrated the detailed aspects of these difficulties and the possible factors that underlie for the difficulties that students expressed. Another study targeted at postgraduate students from an Arab country studying at a Malaysian university mainly examined their academic reading difficulties and individual coping strategies with a mixed method research design (questionnaire and focus group interviews) (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016). The results show that the most challenging areas of academic reading were: “taking notes, working out meaning, identifying supporting ideas, and managing time for reading” (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016, p.369). These studies provide valuable elements for developing a comprehensive framework to examine the main language challenges for international graduate students in Chinese universities.

It has been argued that international students themselves are primarily responsible for enhancing language skills with their own on-going efforts, such as engaging
conversations with diverse people to expand the application of language in a blended context (Lin & Scherz, 2014). On the other hand, host universities were suggested to structure more opportunities (e.g. collaborative works, extracurricular activities, etc.) for social interactions and communications between international and domestic students (McClure, 2007; Wekullo, 2019). In fact, language support has been proven to be an inevitable item in the list of institutional supports for international students. “English language programs” was on the top of the six themes that Martirosyan, Bustamante and Saxon (2019) yielded through analyzing the support services that 20 top US universities offered international students. Roberts et al. (2018) also displayed “English language support” in the category of “learning support”, one of the five categories of support services they grouped according to the information they gathered from the website and the data they collected from participants at one Australian university (p.23).

Likewise, most Chinese universities have been committed to providing language supports to international students. As An and Chiang (2015) addressed, if new international students enroll in a degree program in Chinese but their “Chinese language skills are not proficient enough for their major, they will be placed in the learning Chinese as a second language (L2) class for a year” (P.665) before starting their major study. However, when international students take Chinese language classes, they are most often separated from domestic students (An & Chiang, 2015, p. 665). Moreover, Liu (2017) criticized that one year is too short for international students to reach the necessary level for studying subject courses in Chinese (p.29). That means, this special language training course seems not very effective for developing the language skills demanded to participate in the practical interactions and academic studies. Opening more English-language degree programs could also be seen as one solution for reducing international students’ stress caused by language barriers, but currently, it is argued that except for a few top universities, the English-language programs in Chinese higher education have not been sufficiently well-developed to meet the demands and expectations of international degree students (Liu, 2017, p.31).
2.2 Challenge of academic writing

The challenge of academic writing, being emphasized as “a real concern that student sojourners had to contend with” (Elliot et al., 2016, p.2212), has been specially selected as a separate theme/topic by many researchers when they investigated international students’ adaptation. Generally speaking, non-native speakers among international students have many problems with writing accurately in wording and grammar. A case study of international students’ challenges in academic writing embedded in a prominent US university (Cennetkuşu, 2017) showed that the biggest difficulties for students in academic writing were “having less rich vocabulary and expressions” and “choosing correct words (field-related terminology)” (p. 312). Meanwhile, “using proper grammar”, “connections and transitions” and “presenting ideas clearly” were considered as the most problematic areas according to professors’ responses (Cennetkuşu, 2017, p. 312).

Beyond the challenges attributed to the lack of language skills, several studies laid distinct emphases on academic writing problems from other aspects. For instance, Wette and Furneaux (2018) focused on the challenges of “academic discourse socialization”, defined by Duff (2010) as the processes by which novices not only assure linguistic accuracy, but also gain disciplinary knowledge and the identity of a writer in academic writing. These challenges reported by the participants in their research including “adjusting to a writer-responsible and reader-oriented approach”, “accurately synthesizing source text content”, as well as “learning how to display a stance on their sources and an authoritative, questioning voice in their texts” (Wette & Furneaux, 2018, p. 196). From this point, it is reasonable to distinguish the challenge of academic writing from language proficiency. Besides, the divergent norms and conventions of academic writing among different educational contexts play a stronger role in causing stress in academic writing for international students (Braxley, 2005). After analyzing the views of 31 incoming international graduate students from 20 countries in the University of Reading in the UK and the University of Auckland in
New Zealand, Wette and Furneaux (2018) demonstrated that there was general consensus about challenges arising from the stark differences in the types, standards and instruction of academic writing between previous undergraduate studies at home and postgraduate studies in Anglo-western contexts with powerful academic literacy norms (Wette & Furneaux, 2018, p. 196). Similar conclusions were drawn in Elliot et al.’s (2016) study of international Ph.D. students’ academic acculturation in British universities. Since “learning how to write academically was not part of their earlier learning”, students felt that they had to struggle to meet the various requirements of academic writing. These requirements greatly differed from what was expected in their previous studies, such as “converting descriptive writing into something analytical and critical” and “being mindful not to plagiarize” (Elliot et al., 2016, p.2213). These arguments precisely align with the statements in Lea & Street’s (1998) study of “academic literacies model”, which inspires the conceptual framework for the challenge of academic writing in the current study and will be further explained in section 3.1.

It can be seen that all the aforementioned studies presented a common phenomenon: international students from non-English speaking countries experienced a hard time working on written tasks in English-medium contexts (Elliot et al., 2016; Wette & Furneaux, 2018; Braxley, 2005; Cennetkuşu, 2017, etc.). Presumably this is also a crucial issue for international students in Chinese universities, no matter what language is used for learning and instruction, which yet has not been focused on by Chinese researchers. Therefore, this study includes academic writing as one of the key challenges for international students while examining the same issue in the Chinese context.

In order to improve academic writing, it has been shown that international students tend to welcome various forms of support rather than solely relying on individual efforts (e.g. McClure, 2007; Cennetkuşu, 2017; Wette & Furneaux, 2018). Researchers also advised more external provisions on supporting international students in terms of their
challenges of academic writing. Institutions were expected to offer “consistent support in the form of workshops or meetings for student cohorts”, and facilitate “peer and mentor-novice support relationships” (Wette & Furneaux, 2018, p.196). Gopee and Deane (2013) summarized both institutional and non-institutional enablers expected to facilitate academic writing through interviewing 10 undergraduate students (half were international students) at a British university as follows: clear guidelines and feedbacks, writing support center, informal peer collaborative work, resource material support (p.1626). In addition to practical responses, Cennetkuşu (2017) argued that “if professors and students in higher education become conscious of each other’s expectations and practices, higher education through second/foreign language would most likely produce successful writers” (p. 309). So far, most universities in English-medium countries well-known for receiving international students have developed “targeted writing support”, which, like “language support”, was defined as one major theme in Martirosyan et al.’s (2019) paper. Hence, the current study wants to explore the supporting practices to academic writing for international students from the host Chinese universities too.

2.3 Challenge of pedagogical approaches

The academic experiences of international students are “essentially informed by the academic conventions to which they had been exposed” (Elliot et al., 2016, p.2212). Consequently, international students often encounter challenges “triggered by the transition from academic home to host culture” (Young & Schartner, 2014, p. 549), implying large differences in terms of learning styles, instructional methods, scholastic traditions, research approaches, etc.

Most representative cases of these challenges emerge in the studies of Asian students studying in western countries. Many researchers suggested that, apart from language problems, Asian students do not actively engage in classes or seldom express their opinions in a western academic environment because they are used to the force-feeding
way of instructing (Wette & Furneaux, 2018; Quan et al., 2016; McClure, 2007). Also, students with academic backgrounds from a more teacher-centered learning environment that only requires memorization and reproduction for taking examinations (Wekullo, 2019, p.327) generally find it difficult to adapt to a student-centered system where students are expected to employ self-study, which is definitely new to them (Quan et al., 2016, p.338). Other studies explained that, in the academic world, “Asian students tend to adopt spontaneous collaborative approaches in research works and assignments… is highly influenced by the Confucian cultural values that emphasize group work” (Gatfield & Gatfield, 1994; Ramburuth & McCormic, 2001; Tang, 1996; as cited in Lin & Scherz, 2014, p.17). It is believed that, vice versa, when students from western countries go to study in an Asian country, these different pedagogical cultures and traditions can be expected to produce obstacles in their academic adaptation as well. As the problem has been rarely mentioned in the field of Chinese higher education, this study tries to discuss it with a deep investigation.

Lin and Scherz (2014) focused on the pedagogical challenges faced by Asian postgraduate students in the US and defined the instructional challenge which is derived from “the ineffective and non-inclusive instructional delivery” (p.24). This challenge often happens when the instruction is not well-structured, or when the instructors use plenty of “culturally embedded explanations and examples” (p.24), which appear easily because “pedagogy is context-dependent” (Quan et al., 2016, p.338). Besides, many participants indicated that their academic expectations were not met, because they did not get enough opportunities of doing research, practices or internships (Lin & Scherz, 2014, p.25), which was also disclosed in McClure’s (2007) study. Other unmet points mentioned by the students were the overlapped contents in courses or exams, as well as the un-aligned assessments (Lin & Scherz, 2014).

Tensions regarding research were primarily stressed by McClure (2007) who studied the academic marginalization of international graduate students in Singapore, including “high anxiety about ‘usefulness’ of research, insufficient discussions to stimulate input
into research, ‘directionless’ of how to undertake research”, etc. (p.205). Accordingly, in addition to pedagogy, studying research work that students are involved in is also considered as a significant aspect when we look for the academic challenges of international students in China.

In corresponding to the academic pedagogical challenges, as Martirosyan et al. (2019) discovered, various learning support programs and student success initiatives have been offered to international students by the top 20 host US universities. There are “new student orientation, advising and counseling, academic tips, workshops and webinars on US academic life, tutoring, and supplemental instruction” (Martirosyan et al., 2019, p.182). McClure (2007) made a distinction in the support that Singaporean universities provided international students between two dimensions - “experiential support” such as “presentations and Q&A session of first year confirmation seminar”, and “instrumental support” referring to study groups via which students can revise lecture materials and previous examination questions (p.205). Basically, these support services were believed as effective when it comes to their influence on the matriculation, engagement and achievement of international students, thus, students’ learning processes. On the other hand, teachers were recommended to make the contents of their courses more internationally oriented, and to take more inclusive practices (Freeman & Li, 2019, p.35), in order to increase students’ sustainable engagement and improve their overall performance.

Although some supporting services mentioned above, like “academic orientation for new students”, do exist in the Chinese universities, few researchers have made an intensive and comprehensive investigation of them. Whereas in fact, we can find similar suggestions in terms of pedagogy in studies about Chinese international education, for example, Liu’s (2017) advice of “increasing international students’ class participation and engagement, standardizing the assessments, and making the assessments internationally compatible” (p.31). However, the main purposes of these studies were improving the quality of Chinese international education, or meeting international
students’ satisfaction of the teaching and education in the Chinese universities, without concerning whether students confront any difficulties in practice when it comes to these aspects. This study attempts to make a well-rounded exploration of the supporting strategies for international students’ academic learning, based on the challenges that international students experienced during their studies in China.

2.4 Challenge of academic social networks

International students being challenged academically in the host universities is also caused by difficulties in establishing positive internal relationships in the new learning system (Wekullo, 2019, p.327). Firstly, the “peer relationships” and “interactions with faculty” were considered highly correlated to the academic adaptation of international students according to the model of international academic adjustment constructed by Dunn (2006). A few studies mentioned that international students in the English-medium learning environments “experienced a feeling of self-connectedness”, which means that normally international students just came together and interacted among themselves instead of connecting with domestic students and other people from outside their group (Wekullo, 2019, p.328). They perceived “being isolated from or feeling rejected by members of the new academic society” (McClure, 2007, p. 210). In addition, the uncertainty of how to interact with domestic students in classes or while working on group assignments, and “the struggle to understand domestic students’ lack of interest in them” were prevalently considered as significant challenges to overcome (Freeman & Li, 2019, p.31). A questionnaire distributed to international students in eight universities located in western China shows that there is a lack of frequent interactions and in-depth communications between international and local students (Hu & Yao, 2014). The reason might be that “the relatively independent style of managing postgraduate students” in Chinese universities “makes it difficult for Chinese and foreign students to have more opportunities to communicate” (Bentao, 2011, p. 92-93).
Because the relations between students and teachers usually are relatively informal, relaxed and personal in most western universities, they were perceived to be big hindrances to those foreign students who were accustomed to “a conservative hierarchical structure with emphasis on respect for elders” (Elliot et al., 2016, p. 2212). Similarly, there were adaptable stresses emerging in the academic experiences of international students in Chinese universities (Liu, 2017), where teachers always have absolute authority (Elliot et al., 2016).

Moreover, student-supervisor relations have been identified as a dominant challenge for international postgraduate students (McClure, 2007; Yu & Wright, 2016). The majority of students experienced low levels of closeness with supervisors and uncertainty concerning attitudes so that they felt anxiety of how to make contact or manage communication with them (McClure, 2007, p. 204). In addition, students noted that they have to undertake research independently without enough guidance or confidence in their abilities to complete their theses (McClure, 2007; Yu & Wright, 2016). In this respect, “a cross-cultural training program for supervisors” was recommended to “raise supervisors’ awareness of the cultural and attitudinal constructs that both students and they themselves bring to the study environment” (McClure, 2007, p.216). Such a program could also assist in seeking out solutions for the problems surrounding the interpersonal and academic relations between international students and supervisors (McClure, 2007, p.216). Surprisingly, the informal supervision was also reported as highly difficult to adapt to by many international students in the Chinese context, according to Liu’s (2017) survey (p.29). However, the author did not provide any constructive opinions for responding to the supervisory tension.

We can see that in the field of both western and Chinese higher education research, various campus events and student organizations (e.g. clubs, associations, communities, etc.) were regarded as direct and useful methods to structure opportunities for frequent interactions between international students and national students (as well as staff) in the host universities (McClure, 2007; Yu & Wright, 2016; Hu & Yao, 2014). Besides, some
researchers suggested more collaborative activities and teamwork in classes for enhancing students’ sense of belonging (Wekullo, 2019; Wang & Hannes, 2014). Other responses like requesting “host buddies”, “administrators/coordinators” and “tutors/advisors” to help international students’ academic adaptation are also argued to be beneficial for building broad social networks in the new academic system (McClure, 2007; Roberts et. al, 2018).

2.5 Challenge of technological application and resources

International students who were studying in a higher education system from where technology was mostly absent predictably experienced frustrations in technology-rich learning environments (Habib, Johannesen, & Øgrim, 2014, p.200). In a study of international students’ use of digital technology in a Scandinavian institution, many participants reflected on the pressures from using the virtual learning environments (VLEs) in the host university, others stated the troubles finding right information or registration forms within the generic Student web (Habib et al., 2014, p.200). In addition, some researchers demonstrated that Asian students studying in European universities easily experienced obstacles in using numerous academic resources, comprising libraries, hardware and software resources (Wang & Hannes, 2014). For instance, there were difficulties in operating computers in multi-media classrooms, or finding the buildings of some departments (Wang & Hannes, 2014, p.74), and students felt “struggling to use a massive library and advanced laboratory equipment” (Elliot et al., 2016, p.2212). Based on these findings, host universities were suggested to proactively provide detailed instruction and information regarding the application of learning-assisted technologies and academic resources in the orientation session, such as choosing courses in the online systems, utilizing university facilities, and searching digital resources, etc. (Wang & Hannes, 2014; Elliot et al., 2016). Furthermore, Habib et al. (2014) argued for an increased diversity in designing technologies, and advocated educators to avoid the weaknesses of international students in terms of using technologies when applying them (p.204).
On the other hand, the opposite feedbacks concerning library services of Chinese universities from international students were found in some Chinese studies, with complaints about limited collections, insufficient foreign language books, hard access to preserved materials and foreign digital databases, exclusive circumstances in the libraries (Jiao, Zhou, Zhou, & Zhou, 2009; Tang & Shi, 2014). Nonetheless, the language barrier was still one of the biggest issues in accordance with the general response of the difficulties in using library services because there is a lack of “English librarians” and “clear signage for catalog in both Chinese and English” (Jiao et al., 2009, p.7). Therefore, support strategies including training programs for assisting international students in using library resources, appointing professional librarians for communicating with international students, constructing an evaluation and feedback mechanism of services, and enlarging cooperation with libraries of the foreign universities to share databases (Tang, & Shi, 2014, p.138-139) were recommended to the Chinese higher education institutions.

In addition to various practical supports targeted at each of the aforementioned challenges, there is an agreement on the need for universities “to have an explicit awareness of the challenges posed” (Wette & Furneaux, 2018, p.196) to international students while adapting into a new academic setting. Besides considering the implementation of practices, it is imperative to “think about ways of increasing awareness of available services and access to those services” (Martirosyan et al., 2019, p.178). After reviewing the literature regarding international student engagement, Wekullo (2019) suggested that “administrators should embrace an infusion approach that requires staff to accumulate new knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values by understanding their international students’ unique experiences” (p.332). “It is essential that universities educate instructors regarding their responsibility to understand who their learners are, acknowledge diversity in their classrooms, encourage and facilitate intercultural communication, and provide effective feedback” (Freeman & Li, 2019, p.35). Nevertheless, Roberts and colleagues (2018) suggest that “awareness of support did not necessarily translate into use, the use of a given service did not mean that
participants found it useful”, moreover, support has been impacted by the current corporate management and shifts to a commercial approach (p.29).

Another article which presents a study of Chinese postgraduate students’ academic adjustment in British universities reasserted that universities must be aware of the importance of understanding the adjustment processes of international students and get staff to be prepared to respond to their demands (Quan et al., 2016, p.338). Differently, the timing and approaches of support provision were mainly emphasized here. It is claimed that, rather than using a standardized one time-oriented induction approach, tailored induction events can be offered during the first weeks after the international students’ arrivals, which are seen as the most stressed period to sojourners (Quan et al., 2016, p.338). Also, the authors opposed the idea that institutions should mediate all the problems faced by international students, instead, “it is crucial to make these students acknowledge the role of self-study and individual efforts to successful transition” (Quan et al., 2016, p.340). This is consistent with what An and Chiang (2015) criticized about the services provided to international students by Chinese university administrators that “they fail to train the newly arrived to find their own way” to adapt so that “when the initial period of orientation is over, international students will likely get lost in handling issues on their own” (p.672).

Similar to what has already been discussed in section 1.2 that different types of international students need to be supported separately, the responses to the demands of international students with different backgrounds certainly have to be diversified too. However, both points were found usually being neglected when the host universities developed support systems (Earnest, Joyce, Mori, & Silvagni, 2010, as cited in Wekullo, 2019). Therefore, regular assessments of international students’ demands and various stakeholders’ involvement were proposed for programming adequate supporting strategies (Wekullo, 2019).

So far, all of the literature above lay the foundation for determining what aspects and elements the current study is focusing on when investigating the academic experiences
of international students in Chinese higher education. Besides, the claims and arguments motivate the current study to evaluate the extent to which the revealed deficits, or any other particular expectations of the international degree students and potential problems are existing in Chinese universities. Additionally, as Wekullo has already concluded, “there is a gap between the literature and common practice” (p.321) and “a lack of research that adequately examines the effectiveness of the support programs implemented for international students” (p.334).

2.6 Theories for examining academic challenges of international students and institutional support structures

According to Lea & Street (1998), there are three overlapping theories regarding academic writing and literacy: the study skills model, which primarily “sees writing as a cognitive skill”, the academic socialization model, which refers to “students’ acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres”, and the academic literacies model, which “views writing as issues of epistemology and identities” (p.227). In other words, the third model goes beyond focusing on the skill acquisition and subject area, emphasizing that writing “is concerned with meaning making, identity, power and authority and foregrounds the institutional nature of what “counts” as knowledge in any particular academic context” (Lea & Street, 1998, p.227-228). On the basis of academic literacy theory, although academic writing challenges all graduate students, the variation across national and institutional contexts is expected to produce more pressures for international students, unlike local students who in general have accustomed to the academic settings in their undergraduate study. The present study intends to construct indicators under all of these three models to examine the challenge of academic writing.

For studying experiences and challenges of international students in technology-rich learning environments, Habib and colleagues used the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) which is a social material theoretical approach focusing on the complex webs involving
both human and non-human elements (Habib et al., 2014, p.198). In the realm of educational systems, human elements are students, teachers, course designers, etc., while non-human elements are diverse forms of artefacts, and various networks make up within educative activities between them. However, normally, the non-human elements for assisting human learning processes in educational institutions are not designed by the end-users so that it might cause a mismatch between the intention and the results of using (Habib et al., 2014, p.198). This argument obviously applies to the challenges of using technologies or particular services for international students in a host university where they are absent in the constructing process. Therefore, the ANT approach is adopted to check the networks between international students and the non-human elements in the host university, which could reflect the problems these students have while using “non-human elements” in their new academic setting.

Scott (2014) proposed “a broad definition of institutions that can encompass a variety of arguments” advanced by predecessors and identified three key analytic elements, which comprise institutions and often work in combination in robust institutional frameworks (p.56). According to his conceptualization, “institutions comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott, 2014, p.57).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regulative</th>
<th>Normative</th>
<th>Cultural-Cognitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Basis of compliance</strong></td>
<td>Expedience</td>
<td>Social obligation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Basis of order</strong></td>
<td>Regulative rules</td>
<td>Blinding expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanisms</strong></td>
<td>Coercive</td>
<td>Normative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Logic</strong></td>
<td>Instrumentally</td>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicators</strong></td>
<td>Rules Laws Sanctions</td>
<td>Certification Accreditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affect</strong></td>
<td>Fear Guilt/Innocence</td>
<td>Shame/Honor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Basis of legitimacy</strong></td>
<td>Legally sanctioned</td>
<td>Morally governed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1:** Three pillars of institutions (Scott, 2014, p.64)
As shown in Table 1, the first element identified by Scott is a regulative perspective, which refers to a regulatory process through which institutions constrain or influence social behavior by setting formal rules or using informal mechanisms. Institutions must design both sanctions which make actors feel fear or guilty, as well as positive incentives to support and empower actors. Individuals are considered to conform to regulations under this instrumental logic, though “the conformity is only one of many possible responses” (Scott, 2014, p.64).

A normative perspective comprises values, which are preferred standards that can be used to assess the behaviors and norms, which specify the appropriate means to pursue the valued ends (Scott, 2014, p.64). The conception of “roles” emerges when the values and norms apply to specific actors and positions, resulting in a logic of “appropriateness”, which stands for the expected goals and activities of certain roles (Scott, 2014, p.65). Institutions often employ accreditations and certifications as indicators to define the social obligations of roles. The moral roots inside humans can evoke individuals’ sense of respect or shame, affecting either conformity to or violation of norms.

The cultural-cognitive perspective views people’s actions as internalized symbolic representations of the world (Scott, 2014, p.67), indicating that actors transform their subjective perceptions of social reality to objective forms through making meanings of their behaviors. It stresses the cognitive dimension of human existence, which mediates the external stimuli and individual responses, as well as the cultural framework, which shapes actors’ internal interpretive processes (Scott, 2014, p.67). Cultural elements frequently vary across groups and situations, and the common beliefs and routines in particular circumstances “are followed because they are taken for granted as ‘the way we do these things’” (Scott, 2014, p.69). The underlying logic for compliance in cognitive-cultural systems is orthodoxy, thus, the prevailing understandings imposed by cultural frames in terms of roles and actions. Actors who align with the shared culture of an organization tend to feel confident and competent, while those who are
inconsistent with it will easily get confused and disoriented (Scott, 2014, p.70). As Clark (1983) also demonstrated, like all other major social entities, higher education institutions share academic beliefs as basic ideology, but “certain beliefs have their principal source in a national system as a whole” (p.95), as well as distinguished attachments to individual enterprises (p.81), which in turn affects how they understand particular phenomena and further exhibit behaviors or take actions.

This institutional theory helps the current study to construct a framework that allows for examining the scope and key elements of institutional supporting practices on the academic adaptation of international students in China, which will be presented in section 3.2.
3 Theoretical Framework

This chapter focuses on what the current study uses, according to the literatures and theories reviewed in chapter 2, to examine and analyze the experiences of international students in China, as well as the institutional supporting structure. The first part presents the frameworks for examining the five categories of academic challenges identified in section 2.1, with indicators built upon the major elements and theories adopted or introduced to measure different kinds of international students’ challenges in these studies of international student experiences. Section 3.2 mainly refers to the Scott’s (2014) institutional theory to construct a framework that allows for examining the institutional support structures and practices on the academic adaptation of international students in China. The components in the framework are developed on the basis of the three pillars of institutions, thus, the regulative, normative, and cognitive aspects within an institutional system (Scott, 2014).

3.1 Examining academic challenges

(1) Language proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lectures (content/terminology etc.)</td>
<td>Communication with faculties and peers</td>
<td>Understanding reading materials (content/vocabulary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following instruction (accent/speed/slangs etc.)</td>
<td>Presentation/oral exams</td>
<td>Time to finish readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding others’ words/expressions</td>
<td>Classroom discussions /asking questions</td>
<td>Important information (signs, notifications, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Framework of academic challenge – Language proficiency

When language is mentioned as a challenge for international students, it is prevalently assumed that it contains elements of listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency (Kuo, 2011, p.39). Since academic writing is defined as a separate category of an academic challenge in the study because of its special characteristics, it is not
included in the key aspects of the framework of language proficiency as presented in Table 2.

Not able to understand lectures has been revealed as one of the most typical listening comprehensive challenges that international students face everywhere. Feeling that it is difficult to understand the lectures could result from the lack of enough vocabulary, for example, the particular terminology used in disciplinary fields (Kuo, 2011). The ways that instructors speak also cause obstacles for non-native speaking students in following the lectures (Elliot et al., 2016; Lin & Scherz, 2014). When communicating with faculties and peers, challenges originated from both problems in understanding the meaning of others’ words and expressing students’ own ideas. Few class participations, stress because of presentation requirements and oral exams are other representative challenges relevant to speaking capability (Elliot et al., 2016; Wekullo, 2019).

As for reading, firstly, students have been found having trouble with how to identify key ideas or the overall meaning of reading materials (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Wette & Furneaux, 2018), how to take notes and summarize (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016), how to understand the specialized vocabularies and content (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Kuo, 2011), and so forth. Secondly, they might spend extra time to finish reading tasks when the texts are written in a second language (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; McClure, 2007). In addition, reading ability is closely related to obtaining important academic information, which may lead to problems if the information is in many cases only announced in the language of the host country (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Liu, 2017).

(2) Academic writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing skills</th>
<th>Academic socialization</th>
<th>Academic literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>Disciplinary discourse</td>
<td>Authorial identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary &amp; expression</td>
<td>Stances and examples</td>
<td>Mechanical conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Logsics and criticalness</td>
<td>Plagiarism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition and connection</td>
<td>Knowledge sources</td>
<td>Evaluative standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Framework of academic challenge – Academic writing*
As presented in Table 3, since the study skills model is basically associated with the ability of writing in a second language, the indicators derived from the model in the current study include the skills of formulating sentences with correct grammar or vocabularies to express the right meanings, the techniques of making transitions and connections between sentences and paragraphs, as well as the methods of arranging the structure for a complete text. In addition, from the perspective of the academic socialization model, it is of relevance to consider the convention of a disciplinary domain in identifying students’ difficulties in writing. The range covers using the knowledge and particular discourses required in a field, supporting arguments through examples, writing logically and critically, and obtaining necessary resources. Further, from the perspective of the academic literacies model, the contextual element is supposed to be emphasized in checking writing experiences of international students. For example, it examines the distinct standards and norms of academic writing in the host country and university, as well as the differences in the features of an academic area between previous and current contexts. In addition, issues like whether students acknowledge the identity as an author with responsibility of sense-making, and have awareness of being honest in academic writing also belong to the components of the model and will be examined in the fieldwork.

(3) Pedagogical approaches

The pedagogical challenges can be mainly examined by observing the difficulties that international students meet in the primary education processes - teaching and learning activities, plus some aspects related to the curriculum construction and assessment approaches specific to the host university. Concretely, challenges regarding teaching and learning activities are investigated from the instruction convention, (e.g. whether it is teacher-intensive or student-centered instruction, etc.), the forms or styles of classroom and extracurricular learning activities, as well as the students’ studying time and workloads. Speaking of curriculum, a number of relevant questions can be raised. How is the curriculum constructed and oriented? Can students decide the structure?
How many courses do they have to take for their program? How different and difficult are the contents of the disciplinary knowledge? What outcomes are they expected to realize to obtain the degree? These questions could reflect to what extent the curriculum brings pedagogical challenges to the study of international students. How to assess students’ learning outcomes, how difficult are the assignments or exams, and what results and feedbacks do they get are the key issues when it comes to identifying the indicators that will be used for examining the challenges that international students face in the process of assessment (see Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching &amp; Learning</th>
<th>Research works</th>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction convention</td>
<td>Direction &amp; guidance</td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course workloads</td>
<td>Approaches (Independent/joint)</td>
<td>Freedom of course selection</td>
<td>Degree of difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom activities</td>
<td>Quantities &amp; opportunities</td>
<td>Content of courses</td>
<td>Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular studying</td>
<td>Value of inputs</td>
<td>Expected outcomes</td>
<td>Feedbacks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4**: Framework of academic challenge – Pedagogical approaches

(4) Academic social networks

In order to analyze the challenges of academic social networks, the study integrates the “peer relationships” and “interactions with faculty” in Dunn’s (2006) model of international academic adjustment, as well as the “supervisory relationship” that is emphasized in McClure (2007)’ study as the main elements in the framework (see Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer relationships</th>
<th>Supervisory relationship</th>
<th>Interaction with others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration work</td>
<td>Expectation from supervisor</td>
<td>Course lecturers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual supports</td>
<td>Roles and power</td>
<td>Administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demography of peers</td>
<td>Closeness and freedom</td>
<td>Community members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5**: Framework of academic challenge – Academic social networks

In Chinese graduate schools, supervisors play a significant role and have strong impacts on postgraduate students’ learning process and academic achievements. International students surely possess certain expectations of the supervisors based on previous educational experiences (McClure, 2007, p.205), such as their researching abilities and
interests, as well as what academic development they could achieve via tutoring by supervisors, while they might sense big differences in reality. In addition, there is uncertainty about the values, roles and authorities that supervisors hold in the academic culture in the host country and university (McClure, 2007, p.205). One example is whether students have the right to decide the topics and means of research (independently/joint). Another supervisory tension that McClure (2007) identified is the anxiety concerning the closeness with supervisors and the proper contacting and communicating ways (p.205).

Some aspects included in “interactions with faculty” and “peer relationships” in Dunn’s (2006) model overlap with the instruments in language and pedagogical frames, which have been mentioned above, such as the communicative obstacles and classroom activities. Consequently, the framework of networks will merely focus on personal interrelations. For the relationships with peers, the collaborative activities both inside and outside the classroom, the level of mutual support and the demographical characteristics of closely connected persons are the main indicators. Interaction with others mainly covers the connectedness with course lecturers, administrators and academic community members, as well as “the extent that students use these people as resources for coping adjustment problems and its actual availability” (Zhang, 2010, p.25).

(5) Technological application and resources

When it comes to checking the networks between international students and the non-human elements (‘artifacts’) in the host university, the main elements involved in academic activities include the adaptation to the management information systems (MIS), such as the difficulties students meet in the application system, course selection system and library system, etc., and the technologies used in teaching and learning processes containing the usage of equipment and online learning platforms, as well as the access to digital resources. Besides, as the use of social media increasingly spreads in the educational area either for communicating or as information sharing channels
nowadays (Habib et al., 2014, p.196), the problems this causes with respect to learning experiences, especially to international students, needs to be addressed. Assistance services (e.g. IT services, access to internet and systems, room reservation platforms, etc.), and physical artefacts, like buildings, studying areas, printing places and computer centers, are also considered as important components according to the ANT approach. Consequently, the troubles and challenges for international students related to these elements should be included into the framework as well (see Table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Academic MIS</strong></th>
<th><strong>T&amp;L technologies</strong></th>
<th><strong>Others</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application and registration system</td>
<td>Equipment used in classrooms/labs</td>
<td>Communicating technologies (SNS, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course and exam system</td>
<td>Online learning platforms</td>
<td>Assistance services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library system</td>
<td>Digital resources</td>
<td>Physical artefacts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 6: Framework of academic challenge – Technological application and resources*

### 3.2 Examining institutional supports for international students

Based on Scott’s (2014) three pillars of institutional theory, in the realm of higher education the regulative elements in the host university could be a factor that challenge international students because they are incompatible with the regulations and mechanisms used in students’ home countries and universities. However, there are a few efforts that institutions could make in supporting international students dealing with their academic challenges from a regulative perspective. In general, the regulative perspective potentially includes establishing formal support offices for international students and making one member of the university’s leadership in charge of international affairs. If it goes further to specific types of academic challenges of international students, examples of regulative responses from the host universities are presented in Table 7. Opening English-taught programs is helpful not only to the students from English native speaking countries, since it gives more choices to international students if they merely aim to study a master program in China without learning the Chinese language. Besides, setting comprehensive requisites and
assessments of language ability in the admission process could reduce the instances that international students become very stressed because of language deficiencies. Similarly, explicating the regulations in terms of academic writing and standards of evaluating course essays or graduation theses specific to the host country and university are important factors in adequately supporting international students in their academic work. The distinct teaching and learning approaches and environments can be balanced by launching globally cooperative programs, like double-degree projects or international campuses, which provide some international students opportunities to experience the same pedagogical practices as before. However, they are apparently neither widely applied nor strongly influential owing to many practical obstacles. Clearly addressing the formal responsibilities of supervisors and controlling tutoring activities by signing contracts will help build a proper relationship between supervisors and international students and lead to more effective guidance. The application of management information systems is like a sword with two edges, which creates convenience and effectiveness to some academic activities in a way, such as registration, course selection and exam submission, etc., while it can bring trouble if the system is not well-designed or not user-oriented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language proficiency</th>
<th>Academic writing</th>
<th>Pedagogical variation</th>
<th>Social networks</th>
<th>Technological application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regulative</strong></td>
<td>English-instructed programs, admission requisites</td>
<td>Explicit assessment standards and rules</td>
<td>Globally cooperative programs</td>
<td>Supervisors’ responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Normative</strong></td>
<td>Improving language skills of teachers, language partner activities</td>
<td>Academic writing courses or workshops</td>
<td>International curricular &amp; course content, foreign instructors</td>
<td>Campus associations &amp; activities, collaborative work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural-cognitive</strong></td>
<td>Research in language center</td>
<td>Feedbacks</td>
<td>Course evaluation, research on T&amp;L, teachers training</td>
<td>Supervisor training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7: Theoretical framework for institutional support structures and activities*
When analyzing what is an adequate Chinese university support structure for international students from a normative perspective, we will examine how the university interprets certain rules or regulations, the goals the supporting structure tries to achieve and the concrete measures the university adopts to improve its supporting structure. For instance, in order to run English-instructed programs, it is important to have requirements concerning teachers’ English competence. Students’ language and academic writing proficiency can be prepared and enhanced through diverse channels, such as formal courses (e.g. Confucius Institutions, academic writing course), language partner activities and writing workshops. Designing international-oriented curricular and course contents, along with recruiting foreign instructors can help pedagogical adaptation of international students, both in domestic and global programs. Plenty of academic-related communities and associations, as well as academic activities on campus (e.g. conferences, forums, etc.) can be expected to construct a broad platform for international students to build tight interpersonal connections within their academic field. In addition, arranging collaborative activities both inside and outside classrooms affords more chances to develop and maintain networks between peers. In response to the application of Management Information Systems (MIS) and various technological tools in international student education, relevant technological services are required to cooperate. Detailed instructions regarding how to use these technologies, in addition to a demonstration of all other academic supporting activities, are indispensable in the orientation session.

With regard to international student experiences, the cognitive-cultural institutional perspective refers to whether and how the host university develops a knowledge-based cognition of the challenges that international students face as the foundation for constructing and amending the institutional supporting structure. Usually, monitoring the learning processes of international students and evaluating their learning outcomes in the language center or department, plus providing good feedbacks are helpful for international students and can contribute to improving both language skills and disciplinary learning results, as well as better adapting to the new learning environment.
Course evaluation, monitoring teaching and learning could be beneficial to develop and implement effective pedagogical support to international students from the university. Another cognitive supporting approach is making teachers and supervisors getting a deeper understanding of the demands and traits of the academic adjustment challenges of international students through training programs. In addition, universities need to consider the advice from every unit involved, and update and improve the use of digital technologies timely in order to make them more supportive.

In a word, the aim of the theoretical framework components presented in this chapter is to provide a detailed guidance for data collection, as well as a clear direction for data analysis afterwards. The indicators that have been identified and presented in the frameworks of various categories are mainly focusing on examining the academic challenges of students. The one that composed by the elements of institutional practices responding to each category of challenges upon the three pillars (Scott, 2004) is focusing on the support structures (and activities) of the host university.
4 Methodology

The methodology chapter begins with an introduction of the research design and methods, in where how and why these methods were used, what challenges emerged in fieldworks and how the various unexpected circumstances were dealt with are clearly described. The following section presents the criteria and reasons of selecting certain group of people as sample, and also explains the adjustment of sampling scheme and sample size due to the practical difficulties in reality. Section 4.3 refers to the general requirements on the quality of qualitative research in social science to discuss the validity and ethical issues founded on the facts of the current study. After a short statement of literature searching approach, the steps of data analysis, as well as the methods and tools used in the analyzing process are elaborated. The last section illustrates an analytical framework in the light of the theoretical frameworks developed in Chapter 3, which guides the presentation and interpretation of findings afterwards.

4.1 Research design and methods

This research is a case study design embedded in one of the leading higher education institutions with an international and comprehensive organizational system in China. The reason for selecting this university as the case for the study is because of its reputation and attraction to international students, as well as its early engagement in recruitment and management of international students among a large number of Chinese higher education institutions. Revealing the stage and development of internationalization in one of the top universities in China via the dimensions of both international student experience and institutional supports could provide some implications and inspiration to others who have the same goal of being international. Probing into the weaknesses and problems of the case also could reflect the actual competence of internationalization in the world-class universities in the country. The accessibility and familiarity to the university also affect the case selection strategy as
the author had been working in the Office of International Relations (OIR) in the case university, which to some extent could enhance the credibility of this research.

The study employed descriptive methodology, with the main task of investigating the academic challenges that international students face during studying master programs in the case university, as well as how international students perceive how their academic experiences can be improved. Qualitative research methods were carried out here owing to their nature of “seeing the social world through people’s eyes” (Bryman, 2016, p.392). More specifically speaking, semi-structured interviews were adopted as the main research method in the study because the experiences and perceptions of international students must be interpreted from the perspectives of these students based on their own reflections. Researchers must participate in the mind of observed subjects with face-to-face interaction as the fullest condition to acquire the social knowledge (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p.16, as quoted in Bryman, 2016, p.393). The interviews were conducted online via either Skype or WeChat (a dominant social media service in China) on account of the geographic distance between the researcher and participants, depending on the preferences of the latter. The questions mainly focused on the academic challenges faced by international students in accordance with the indicators of each category of challenges discussed in section 3.1. In the meantime, information concerning supportive structures and activities offered by the host university in addressing each academic challenge, and the perceptions of international students when it comes to the possibilities of these supports to improve their academic experiences were further explored in the interviews. The scope covered regulative, normative and cognitive-cultural aspects, which is in light with the theoretical framework introduced in section 3.2. However, not all the elements displayed in the framework could be captured from the student side through the interviews, since the interviewees may have never learned about the regulations and rules at the macro level, or used any particular supporting activities, let alone knowing the practices developed on the ground of institutional cognition, such as training projects for teachers and supervisors. Even though the author intended to include the university’s perspective in the thesis through
interviews with the administrators for a more comprehensive exploration of institutional supports, this turned out to be impossible during the process of data collection. Therefore, the study is focusing on and presenting the students’ perspectives more than planned in the original design of the thesis.

Nevertheless, document analysis was adopted as tri-angulation to collect data for answering the second research question. The documents primarily included formal regulations regarding international graduate education (e.g. application procedures, admission and graduation requirements), various brochures that the host university and each department provide to international students both before departure and after arrival, plus all the academic relevant information (e.g. program structure and curriculum) in the host university’s website. Moreover, these documents contributed to the examination of the connection between how students feel their experiences can be developed or improved, or what should get attention, and what the university is focusing on in its support structures for international students. In other words, it complemented the data collected from the interviews with the international students for analyzing the extent to which the two components – university’s support structures, and what international students experienced and expect – align with each other.

4.2 Sampling scheme and sample size

The participants for interviews are supposed to be international students who have received their higher education in other countries before moving to China, implying that the experiences of studying in a graduate program in Chinese universities are brand new to them. Also, they are expected to have been studying a master program in the case university over one year because the “learning curve” found in previous studies demonstrates that normally the first year is the most critical transitional stage for international students’ adaptation to a new academic environment (Yu, 2010, p.305). Various challenges emerge from the beginning and “increase steadily over the first 4-6 months, followed by a levelling off until the end of the first year” (Yu, 2010, p.305).
The nationalities of student interviewees in this study are Asian and European since they account for the largest population among all international students in both China and the case university, as mentioned before.

As a starting-point, the author planned to recruit six to nine student interviewees from three particular master’s programs in the case university, thus, two to three from each. The selected programs represent the typical purposes and motivations that drive international students study abroad, including being interested in the culture of the host country, aiming to develop an attractive career path, as well as chasing for the best education in an academic field. As for the decision of sample size, in qualitative research, it should not be either too small as to make it difficult to achieve data saturation, nor too large so that it is difficult to undertake the analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007, p.289).

Due to the criterion sampling scheme, the author tried to formally request for assistance from the administrative offices of the three programs in the case university, in order to obtain the representative sample frame. However, according to their responses, as already explained in section 1.2, any information regarding international students is impossible to be opened to the public because it is becoming a sensitive issue in the Chinese higher education system at present, which created obstacles to get access to the potential participants through formal channels. Because of these unexpected circumstances and challenges confronted during the process of recruitment, the author decided to search for potential participants through personal connections, as well as enlarge the sample frame to all the postgraduate international students in the university instead of confining specific programs, as long as the motives that students have to study at the case university are relevant to the aforementioned common purposes of studying abroad. For example, the author’s international peers in University of Oslo (UiO) introduced some friends from their home countries who are studying at the case university, or in the same city as the case university is located. It turned out to be an effective way because many communities of international students from the same
countries are well-organized and the members keep close liaisons. Besides, a few acquaintances of the author who are working or studying in the case university also helped finding the international students who would interact openly in the interviews. At the same time, the author realized that the original criteria of the interviewees should be adjusted in light of the actual conditions, for instance, the studying year of a participant doesn’t have to be second year or above since several international master’s programs in the case university are merely one year long, while the diversity of the participants is still kept in focus. After getting in touch with a few qualified referrals, the snowball method was used to recruit more suitable candidates. Actually, getting access to the potential interviewees through informal channels produced more resources and informants for the study, as well as created certain level of trust between participants and the researcher in advance, yet it was more time-consuming.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Length of study</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Starting semester</th>
<th>Language used in interview</th>
<th>Communicating tool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P 1</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>International public policy</td>
<td>Fall, 2019</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>WeChat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 2</td>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>International public policy</td>
<td>Fall, 2019</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>WeChat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 3</td>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>International public policy</td>
<td>Fall, 2019</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 4</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>3 year</td>
<td>Classical Chinese Literature</td>
<td>Fall, 2018</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>WeChat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 5</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>2 year</td>
<td>Teaching Chinese as A Second language</td>
<td>Fall, 2018</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>WeChat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 6</td>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>2.5 year</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Fall, 2018</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>WeChat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Basic information about interviewees

Eventually, six students have participated into the interviews (see Table 8). Except for one student from Hungary, all the others came from Asian countries. Among them, three students are taking the same English-taught program – International Public Policy, with the same motivation of career development. Others are studying different Chinese-instructed programs, while being interested in the Chinese culture was the main factor for their decision to study in China. Unfortunately, the sample lacks the units from the master’s programs that come out among the best in certain academic fields in the world.
This could be attributed to the reality that fewer international students have been admitted in the master’s programs of the top ranked disciplines in the host university due to the restriction of language. Instead, the majority of international students in these fields are studying Ph.D. programs as the areas are often more research-intensive.

4.3 Validity and ethical issues

According to Kleven’s typology of validity (Kleven, 2008), firstly, the indicators to measure the key concept of the study - international student experience - were set up closely in line with the research questions and analytical framework. Also, during the entire research processes, the author paid attention to the coherence of indicators and the consistency of research questions, data collection and analysis to ensure the construct validity.

Secondly, the sample size may be not large enough to be highly representative, however, this problem is supposed to be mitigated by the depth and width of the contents in the interviews so that the collected data are substantial enough to address the research questions and reach the validity of inferences.

Thirdly, the causal relation of variables was not a principle point probed in the current study. Some information that were directly derived from the questions in the interviews might indicate the influences of the institutional support for international students on their experiences and perceptions. However, whether there are causal effects existing was analyzed cautiously and discussed precisely in the findings, as the correlation was inferred on the basis of interviewees’ own reflections rather than accurate empirical evidence.

Finally, the main purpose of this study is investigating a certain social phenomenon but not generalizing. In other words, in contrast to getting a thorough picture and general information, the central objective of the study is to obtain an intimate knowledge about the experiences of international students through exploring the true viewpoints and
inner perceptions via conversations with them. It is “the cogency of the theoretical reasoning”, rather than statistical criteria, which is decisive in considering the generalizability of the findings of qualitative research (Bryman, 2016, p.399).

In addition, on the basis of the four main ethical principles that Bryman (2016) identified, the study doesn’t face big ethical problems on the whole. The interviewees were noticed clearly what this study is about and the questions are merely in terms of their real experiences and opinions, which have nothing to do with their personal privacies. All the participants had autonomy, capacity of deliberation, and self-determination when they were asked to be interviewed, which complies with one of the basic ethical principles - respect for persons, as defined by World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2002, pp. 17-18, cited in Greg, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p.317). Before starting each interview, a consent form had been signed by the interviewee, and each interviewee was given opportunities to raise requirements and ask questions to the researcher, as well as to accept or deny recording the conversations. In fact, most of the interviewees requested for making their identities anonymous, as a result, the author added an additional note of stating this demand in the consent form, and suggested the participants provide an un-recognized signature, in order to “avoid the risk of loss of confidentiality” (Greg, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p.330).

During the interviews, some strategies have been taken for ensuring to get the expected information and avoiding conversations going to the wrong direction, but they were definitely neutral and transparent without any deception neither inducement. When analyzing the results and discussing the answers, the main purpose was to find the facts rather than judgements about whether the interviewees are right or wrong. It means that the study would not be harmful to the development or performance of the interviewees in the future at all.

The working background in the case university of the author might create challenges in terms of whether the arguments are objective enough or whether there are initial epistemic believes and potential biases. Firstly, the main target of the study -
international graduate students - were not part of the author’s previous working responsibilities. Also, the author has no interest relation with the case university anymore since she resigned the position and started the master program at UiO. Thus, neither preconceived notions or prejudiced opinions existed, nor certain results were expected under the influential factors or pressures throughout the research.

4.4 Literature searching and identifying approach

Through searching in the Google Scholar and databases linked with Oria — the searching engine in the library of UiO, with key words of “international student experience/adjustment/adaptation”, “academic challenges of international students”, and “institutional support for international students”, the author identified literature that is closely relevant to the current study. Besides, there are a few essays written in Chinese language being selected to analyze after searching the same key words translated in Chinese language in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI).

4.5 Data analysis approach

The qualitative content analysis approach was mainly adopted in this study, which aims to seek for the predetermined themes and categories within the collected data, in order to construct the meaning of the texts to address the research questions (Bryman, 2016, p.285). These themes and categories and their major underlying elements were developed on the basis of relevant theories and literature presenting previous research, as well as used as guide for data collection of this study. The major data sources for analyzing comprised the texts transcribed from verbal recordings of the interviews, and the information from the documents, which could “fill the empty spaces in the protocol for the item under considerations” (Bryman, 2016, p.565).

In the process of transcribing right after each interview, the original data have been briefly proceeded spontaneously. For example, few unpredicted situations that happened during the interviews, and the filler words that imply meaningful information
have been highlighted and noted as important memos. As for the two interviews that were conducted in Chinese, instead of translating the whole transcriptions into English, I summarized the conversations in line with the interview guide and created a spreadsheet (see Appendix 2) filling with the key words and phrases so as to facilitate further analysis. Afterwards, all of the transcriptions and summaries were imported into the Nvivo software, which was used to assist working on the analysis in terms of coding, comparing, connecting and other necessary analyzing strategies.

The analysis began with the preliminary explorations of the data with reading each data source for many times while annotating particular text segments and actively reflecting on the connections, in order to capture the key points and ideas. Then I moved on to coding and developing codebooks. Although the items intended to be examined by the study were already determined from theory and literatures, codes derived from the data are indispensable as they are often used with shorter segments so that it is easily to capture the main “meaning units” in a passage of text (Bazeley, 2013, p.144). Also, if I merely used the theoretical categories as broad codes, there is a possibility of “ignoring the finer nuances in the text” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 143) with significance in understanding the data. The following step was integrating the identified codes and sorting them out in line with the categories and themes in the theoretical frameworks presented in chapter 3. In the meanwhile, a constant review and comparison of codes were undertaken to confirm the themes were properly defined, as well as to identify whether there are other distinctive themes excluded or missed in the frameworks. Furthermore, cross-case analyses were undertaken in which I tried to look at the patterning and interrelationship of each latent theme (challenge) across the set of responses (Bazeley, 2013, p.285). Finally, interpretations and arguments were generated through exploring the patterns and relationships within and across the themes, which will be presented in the next two chapters.
4.6 Analytical framework for interpreting findings

In the process of analysis, firstly, I examined whether the interviewees had any difficulties in terms of those items in the five theoretical frameworks of academic challenges that I identified (see Table 2 - Table 6), and specifically what these difficulties are. Then corresponding to the diverse aspects within each category, the kind of support that international students received, as well as whether that support works or not from students’ perspectives were explored on the basis of the data from interviews. In the meanwhile, I discovered other supporting practices that the university has developed in responding to the potential challenges of international students through analyzing the materials, documents, news, notifications, etc. that I found on the university’s website. All the data sources of supporting practices were investigated in accordance with Scott (2004)’s three pillars theory (see Table 1) and the elements that I produced in the theoretical framework of institutional support (see Table 7). Finally, I related the factors of institutional support revealed in both interviews and documents to the experiences and challenges recognized from interviewees’ responses, and analyzed whether those supporting practices that the university offered matched the challenges that international students faced (see Figure 2). The relations between the various components in the two groups range from the large dimensions to the most basic units within the categories, which means that the practices in the three theoretical “pillars” (regulative, normative and cognitive) of institutional support could be targeted at either the five general categories of challenges, the subthemes subordinated to each challenge, or the specific problems belonging to the subthemes. Besides, sometimes these components could be overlapping, for example, a specific difficulty might directly stand for the lack or dysfunction of a particular supporting practice. The results of every step of analysis are displayed in the form of findings in the following chapter.
Figure 2: Analytical framework
5 Findings

This chapter presents the main findings derived from analysis of the collected data. The structure of this presentation is aligned with the analytical framework (Figure 2) developed in the previous chapter. Each section firstly reports the major problems and difficulties that international students faced in terms of a specific category of academic challenges, following with the corresponding supports provided by the host university and how students perceived these supports. The academic challenges revealed in each section cover the representative elements in each of the theoretical frameworks identified in chapter 3. The corresponding institutional support contains supporting strategies and practices in the three systems of institutions proposed by Scott (2014), ranging from the supportive regulations and rules, the implementations of the regulative support and concrete activities, to the cognitions of international students’ challenges and awareness of understanding their demands and improving their experiences.

5.1 Challenges of language proficiency

The majority of participants gave quite positive reflections on their own speaking abilities, with answers like “I don’t have any problems with communications with others” (P1, P3 & P5), “I can say that I am an excellent English speaker” (P4), “I was not that worried about English” (P2). As for the three Southeast Asian students (P1, P2 & P4) who are taking the English-taught program in Public Policy, basically they are able to express their points in English very well, even though they are non-native English speakers and have experienced moments of getting stuck in conversations. But, sometimes confidence was mentioned as an issue which caused reluctance to actively participate into Q&A sessions and discussions in the class. The two participants (P3 & P5) who majored in studies regarding Chinese language did not face big problems in speaking and communicating largely because they both obtained a bachelor degree in Chinese language and had been exchanged to a Chinese university during their undergraduate studies.
The only exception in this respect was P6 who had been trained Chinese language from a zero base for three years at the host university before being enrolled into the Chinese-instructed master’s program in Psychology. She thought her Chinese language “is super far away” even though she reached the admission requirement of HSK level 6 for Chinese language. When she talks with teachers and classmates, she has to try very hard for them understand her, and the stress resulting from speaking Chinese is constantly affecting her. As she commented:

“When I have to speak, for example, like I really express what I mean in a rush, I am like, ‘Oh, it’s horrible.’ It’s still, for example, tones are still horrible……If it’s just a meeting where we have to do discussion, then it’s kind of, for me, it’s like half in English and half in Chinese.”

Secondly, not many participants experienced challenges in terms of listening comprehension. The students coming from the English-taught program confirmed that all their instructors and peers speak English perfectly so that basically they have no problems with understanding their instructions and words. Even the student P6 who was struggling with speaking believed that “reading and listening are easier than writing and speaking”, not to mention the two specializing in the Chinese language whose classmates are mostly Chinese or foreigners with the same Chinese capacity as them. The only matter that makes a few participants feel that it is hard to follow lectures is the content, for example, the really hard economic theories for P2, the quite new and unfamiliar psychological knowledge for P5, and the advanced mathematics used in statistics course for P6. According to these interviewees who addressed difficulties of following lectures, actually it was the education background and previous knowledge that matter more than the language itself, which seems more likely to be counted as one of the challenges relevant to curriculum that will be discussed later in session 5.3.

When English-speaking interviewees talked about communicating with domestic students, there were opposite comments on the English proficiency of these Chinese students. Half of them said that the Chinese students they have interacted with speak English very well, while the others reported the reality as “they, on certain point, cannot
address very well in English and require me to speak in Chinese” (P4) and “they know a little bit English, but cannot speak very well or normally do not talk in English” (P6). In the case of P4, because all of her peers are international students and she only meets a few Chinese students throughout her courses, she feels fine as the Chinese language is not closely associated with her classes and academic studies. But, it puts a little bit of pressure on P6 who only has Chinese classmates and lab mates so that she needs to try her best to understand what they are saying, whether in English or Chinese.

Understanding reading materials was not recognized as a hard task by any interviewee, although whether having basic knowledge about the subjects and fields was a factor, similar to the effect on following lectures as explained above. The problem of reading is actually more concerning the volume rather than the language itself, and it really depends on programs and courses. This issue was highlighted by the three participants from the English-taught program in Public Policy, which will be further discussed in session 5.3.

For non-Chinese speaking students, the most problematic aspect as regards reading was to get the necessary information on campus, because based on interviewees’ reflection, most of the academic-related information is written in Chinese. For example, P2 mentioned that when she applied for the scholarship, the application form that needs to be filled out and submitted to the university was written only in Chinese. Same problem also happened to P6, who knows Chinese and takes a Chinese-taught program, while suffering from a questionnaire without an English version. “It required 90% of completion and took me 14 hours to finish” (P6). Furthermore, she added another “horrible” experience of reading the books concerning rules and regulations of the university, which were fully written in Chinese, with one of them actually being prepared especially for international students. Sometimes, even if the information has an English version, “somehow, I feel like it is not as much comprehensive as the Chinese one” (P4). When comparing the English and Chinese website of the university, just like P4 said, the English website is very simple, and it does not contain as much
information as the Chinese one. This issue actually should be considered as one element of institutional support in responding to the language challenge of international students. In the current situation, the institutional support in this area obviously did not meet in all respects the demands and expectations of the students.

Nevertheless, the host university was revealed to have offered many effective support on the point of language challenges faced by international students in other facets. More and more English-instructed master’s programs have been developed, in where international students were able to complete their degree studies in China using English. Taking the English-program of Public Policy, for instance, “all the lecturers are very great at English” (P4) as “they graduated from high Ivy league universities either in the UK or US”, which was thought as “one of the requirements to teach at the host university” (P1). Besides, the program coordinator who is dealing with the administrative affairs, which includes regular communications with students, also speaks English well. Moreover, the program arranged a compulsory elementary Chinese language course to “make sure we are convenient in our general life” (P2). According to ISD⁴, there are over 30 English-taught master’s programs open to international students in 2020, with approximately one third double degree programs included. Apart from English-instructed programs, even international students, like P6, who are studying Chinese-taught programs (linguistic majors excluded) were required to take some classes of Chinese language, society and culture in the first semester, which was thought helpful for improving their language ability too. In addition, the host university has a few student associations that frequently carry on programs like “language buddy”, from which international students can find a language partner to exchange.

In order to prepare the Chinese language proficiency of international students for further academic study (degree programs), the host university offers the Chinese language training program organized by the department of Teaching Chinese as a

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⁴ http://www.isd.pku.edu.cn/HOME/ADMISSION/Degree_Programs/Master_Programs1.htm
Second Language, which P6 has been studying for three years before being enrolled in the Chinese-taught master’s program in Psychology. From her perspective, the language training is neither closely related to practical applications in daily life, nor enough to get students well-prepared for further academic study, although she asserted that all language professional assistances anywhere in the world can be the same upon her own experiences of learning Germany and English.

“They are not really for, emm...ha... they don’t really have you prepared for anything you want, I think. They are inclining and trying to do their best, but they are so far away from profession.” (P6)

On the other hand, we were informed by P5 who is majored in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language about the language supports that the department has promoted. There is a weekly voluntary event organized jointly by her department and Yenching Academy, with teaching basic Chinese language to those international students who are studying the English-taught Master’s program in China Studies without knowing any Chinese language. Besides, she and her classmates often help the students from their home countries in learning Chinese, although sometimes they still need to ask other Chinese students for help when they are not sure about the questions or meanings of the Chinese language. All of these experiences will be adversely applied into their own learning processes later, aiming to make progress in future teaching activities.

5.2 Challenges of academic writing

Since the English-taught program in Public Policy targets international students, the requirements and formats of written tasks were perceived as the same as the standardized English writing applied internationally. Consequently, academic writing was not recognized as an issue by the two students (P1 & P4) who had been involved in many research activities and writing practices in the study field in previous working places, especially in terms of writing skills and knowledge domain. The only thing that somewhat pressed them was that the time was thought relatively tight for writing a
master thesis in parallel with taking subject courses within a year. In contrast, the evaluative criteria of academic writing were thought much more demanding and challenging to P2, compared with her first master’s program in her home country. Besides, one particular point that bothered her during the preparation of the proposal for her graduation thesis was that she had changed her topic many times.

Predictably, writing essays or theses in the Chinese language was like a “torture” for international students who study Chinese-taught programs. Firstly, “the formal written Chinese language is totally different with oral Chinese” (P5 & P6). “For example, there are 50% differences between written and oral language in English or German, while there are 90% differences in Chinese”, as P6 claimed, which “is a whole new level of suffering”. Sometimes she had to spend hours to find the correct words and explanations, and she always needed her Chinese classmates to check the grammar and review her writing. P5 described her weaknesses of writing skills with “not good at the sequences and structure, as well as the connection and relations between paragraphs”. Furthermore, because academic writing much varies from the daily writing approaches that P5 was used to in her undergraduate study in Chinese, plus she was not confident about her own logical and critical thinking, academic writing was seen as one of the most difficult parts in her graduate study. In addition, she reported a little pressure due to the need of constant reflection on master thesis on her own, with which she was quite unfamiliar comparing with the writing conventions of her undergraduate graduation thesis.

Speaking of disciplinary discourses, the proper and precise expressions in psychology raised the feeling in P6 that foreign students in other majors experienced a much easier time than she did. P3 came up against few difficulties derived from the indirect way of discourse and the need of unpacking the classical Chinese expressions and contents in the texts in his field. Moreover, the largest problem he has encountered was the trouble of accessing some ancient reading materials and literature, which are not available to the public in the main library of the university. As he stated, “the library was too
conservative to loan ancient texts and books to students, which is expected to shift
towards being more open to let students use the materials more flexibly.”

Difficulty in getting particular data needed for writing term papers was also recalled by
P4 when she discussed her thesis topic with her supervisor. She was reminded that if
she chose a topic related to China, most of the needed data would be provided in
Chinese, and some of them might be inaccessible to the public. Therefore, she
abandoned the idea of writing something about China and in the end has not
experienced any obstacles in finding data. In contrast, other interviewees had positive
experiences with the resources that the university library provided, whether hard copies
of books, or electronic journals and other materials in various databases.

All programs offered one academic writing course to students, which was commonly
thought helpful by the interviewees, although they admitted that it still needs a lot of
self-practices. Actually, the courses were more like research method courses for
assisting students’ master theses writing, in which academic writing was a dominant
part. In the courses, besides the basic techniques like structure, usage of marks, citation
and reference, teachers also have addressed the issue of plagiarism, and explained the
duplicate checking rules used for assessing students’ assignments and theses in the
Chinese higher education system. In addition to the course provided by each program,
the university library offered workshops and information literacy courses for assisting
staff and students how to use various kinds of library resources and services, including
“document retrieval and utilization, database searching, academic writing and software
application, to name just a few” (Library Workshops | P University Library, n.d.).
Strikingly, none of the interviewees ever mentioned these activities when talking about
institutional supports for academic writing, neither is it possible to estimate whether
these supporting activities are also offered in English or not.

Finally, in some Chinese-taught programs, including the one where P6 is enrolled,
international students are allowed to choose whether to write the graduation thesis or
some of the course papers in English or Chinese, which can also be seen as one of

supportive regulations towards international education in accordance with Scott’s (2014) institutional theory (see Table 1).

5.3 Challenges of pedagogical approaches

Most of the courses in the English-taught program in Public Policy were instruction-oriented, with a few individual or group presentations required in the class. Students generally expressed appreciations to the teaching methods of lecturers, as illustrated by comments like “the lectures are well-structured, and the teachers give us step by step instruction, from the background of the cores, come into the more complicated issues” (P1), “professors are quite open to questions” (P2), and “personally, I find the lectures were very interesting” (P4). However, as already mentioned in section 5.1, all interviewees complained about the heavy burdens originated from a great volume of reading assignments.

“All the classes require us read quite (strengthened) a lot of materials before the class; it’s really difficult to get everything done the day before the class; that is one of the hardest challenges in this program.” (P1)

“It’s just like a freakily thing; catching up is really (strengthened twice) hard; I cannot finish all.” (P2)

“I feel a bit struggle to read all of the materials before the classes, meanwhile I have another class during that day.” (P4).

Nonetheless, they more or less agreed that readings do help them getting knowledge beforehand so as to easily grab the ideas of lectures, as well as support them to engage more in the discussion or bring questions, except for P2 who argued that:

“Even if you have finished everything in your assignment, the next day when you actually showed up in class, your professor was talking about so much more advanced things, you know, it’s just like take your eyes black” (P2).

Moreover, there was one course being cited as an example by all three interviewees, which was thought extremely demanding and drove them terribly stressful. The course required 300-500 pages of readings or sometimes a whole book for just one lecture, plus a lot of assignments in the form of a final paper, mid-term paper, class homework,
weekly chapter summaries, and frequent presentations. The program had seven modules in total in the first semester, and the students had classes almost every day in a week, which was thought acceptable but slightly overwhelming, because they were supposed to prepare for master thesis simultaneously and submit thesis proposals within two months after arrival.

Conversely, referring to the three interviewees who are taking Chinese-taught programs, normally there are not so many readings requested by their lecturers who normally only chose highly relevant literature. The teaching and learning activities were quite diverse in these programs, which was perceived beneficial to their critical thinking and academic development. Besides presentations, they had “small study groups like reading meetings arranged by supervisors” (P3 & P5), “workshops, seminars, and guest lectures organized by department” (P3), “activities like designing and preforming teaching practices, and giving comments on each other’s work” (P5), “regular discussions in classes and experiments in laboratory” (P6).

The workloads of courses were considered to be too demanding by both P3 and P5, while much more stressful to the latter who was pretty frustrated when newly entered into the environment and always felt too late to do so many assignments and exams. In the case of P6, her feeling of learning tasks was quite fluctuated. There were not many courses in her program, while she had presentations almost every two weeks. Besides, she was continuing learning Chinese language by herself, and trying to improve her competences and knowledge in statistics through an online course with a tutor from her home country. “Sometimes I feel I can handle my study, sometimes I feel not. It really depends on the mood of the day.” In addition, she has struggled with one specific course in which the teacher gave a large amount of homework with a very short time to finish.

“That was the moment that I thought, ‘no, that was not why I came to China. That thing should’ve not happened there’. I was like super down, and I said that I cannot do this.”

Some participants have been in a hard time while learning subjects that were new to them. These subjects basically were compulsory core courses, which were referred to
as “if you have choice, you just wouldn’t choose them at all” (P6). And the interviewees felt that the curriculum of Chinese-taught master’s program is developed on the basis of the fundamental knowledge that Chinese students have acquired in undergraduate studies in the same field, which substantially differs from what international students studied in their home countries. All the programs consist of mandatory core courses and selective courses, and students in the Chinese-taught programs are allowed to choose which semester they would like to take specific courses, while the time for compulsory courses in the English-taught program in Public Policy were fixed by the program.

Joining research projects seems not common in the English-taught program of Public Policy, because

“Every student is quite occupied with the classes and the theses, and our schedules are very tight so probably to join in a research project is a bit difficult for us.” (P1)

“You have to finish the program within one year, it means there are abundant of work, so there was no time to do extra researching works”. (P2)

At the same time, one of the students (P4) has been involved in several research projects, but these projects are from her previous working place rather than part of this program. “I don’t think that the university will invite us to join in a project because it’s only one year” (P4). However, according to P1’s opinion, she also did a lot of research while working on presentations or course assignments. “In my definition, I consider that as research because I have to read, I have to find the data, I have to find the evidence that will support my arguments” (P1).

P6 is the only interviewee who has been involved in one of the research projects that was managed by her supervisor. She is working in a research group in a laboratory and in charge of one part of the research project. In fact, this is one of the graduation requirements of the program and the input of the research will become her graduation thesis. In addition, she has to present the results in a conference and publish it by the
end of her studies. “It’s obvious challenging and sometimes I am suffering from it, but thanks to my supervisor and my lab mates, I am like Okay with it.” (P6)

Except for attending a few forums or conferences held in departments or the university, the other two interviewees have not participated in any formal research work like publishing a paper or joining projects of their supervisor. The reason for P3 was the limited time to do his own research work. As far as P5 can tell, there were very few opportunities being provided for international students by her department, yet domestic students were engaged a lot in research work from the very beginning of their studies.

All programs have various means of assessment, including few written exams that require answering a certain number of questions within a limited time, some presentations, and a lot of term papers. Among these assessment approaches, written exams were regarded as the most stressful and challenging by all participants. The three interviewees from the program of Public Policy have not had any final exams yet by the time being interviewed, but they already felt anxiety with respect to the coming written exams, even if the teachers already clarified what is going to be covered. The written exam was thought quite interesting to P2 because she seldom had this type of assessment in the higher education programs of her home country. Moreover, she suggested dividing the evaluation process into several smaller parts, instead of 100% counting the whole assessment on just one exam or assignment. Other participants also found some difficulties in finishing course essays because “it takes time to think and construct, and the result is more subjective and unpredictable as it is pretty much depending on teachers’ own opinions,” (P5), and “sometimes it needs to learn more new knowledge” (P3 & P6).

Most of the interviewees do not care much about the results of exams, as long as the grade is not that bad. After results have been presented, not all teachers gave feedback on their own volition, yet students were welcome to ask for feedbacks if they want to know how to improve.
“Because the standards and requirements are higher in the case university and my peers are all outstanding students, I don’t expect high grades and just make efforts and try my best.” (P5)

“Actually, in the very beginning, I was not that happy about it. Because I had to accept that I will never ever reach the level where my classmates are. But then I actually got very good grades, and I realized that not all of the teachers, but most of the teachers, they gave grades according to my own improvement, and not really comparing to others.” (P6)

As stated in section 5.1, the host university is opening over 10 double degree master’s programs in the year 2020, aiming to offer more international-oriented education. Besides, it can be seen from the information on master programs on the webpage of ISD\(^5\) that the master’s program in Public Policy is one of the Academic Education Programs sponsored by the Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China to foster high-end governmental officials, research fellows and managerial personnel for the recipient countries. Therefore, the teaching approaches and curriculum of this program are much inclined to adapt to the demands of international students, even though there was no foreign lecturer in the program. For example, when students were assigned learning tasks, instead of merely focusing on China, they were given so much freedom to choose any national contexts to study, as P4 reckoned that “teachers are recognizing the difficulty to international students like us to collect data in China”. However, if they decided to do research related to China, teachers were always supportive and definitely helped them in accessing the resources, either by themselves or through arranging a working team with designating one Chinese student in the group.

The description of the Master’s program in Public Policy on the website of ISD also provides us with basic information on the education plan of the program, such as the curriculum structure (including descriptions of courses and master thesis, as well as the expected learning outcomes), degree requirements, and profiles of instructors, etc., which has been shared with the students at the beginning of the program too. As indicated by P2, “our program coordinator often shared information of seminars at our school with us, which seems quite early whenever she chose what she thought that we

\(^5\) [http://www.isd.pku.edu.cn/info/1468/5770.htm](http://www.isd.pku.edu.cn/info/1468/5770.htm)
might be interested in”. In this respect, similar reflections were given by the interviewees from the Chinese-taught programs, e.g. “usually teachers give a syllabus before the first class” (P5). Moreover, they reported some other practices in supporting their learning experiences, like the opportunities to change or add courses if they failed to select the expected courses, which could also be seen on the website of ISD6.

When it comes to assessment, firstly, the grading system of most programs in the host university is aligned with the international standards by adopting A, B, C, D, F. Secondly, there were no approaches for students to improve grades or appeal if they were not satisfied with exam results. They can only apply for checking the answer sheet in case of a written exam, or retake the exam if they failed. However, the students did not take this as a problem because they do not care that much about grades, and they thought the results could be subjective if the exam form was a term paper since there is no exact answer to judge whether a paper is good or not. Lastly, two participants (P3 & P6) have been pressed by the reality that some of the teachers in their programs did not give information about assessments in advance, which was expected to be changed.

Almost all master programs required their students to do an evaluation on each course and instructor(s)’ teaching at the end of a semester. Unfortunately, there was no information available that would have allowed to examine what specific components the university intended to evaluate. Additionally, when talking about the large number of readings requested by one of the lecturers in her program, P1 had a point that she would like strongly suggest to the university:

“He should understand the level that he is teaching. He is not teaching Ph.D. students, he is teaching master level. So, the reading materials should be adjusted as fine”.

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6 http://www.isd.pku.edu.cn/info/1489/2654.htm
5.4 Challenges of academic social networks

All students in the English-taught program in Public Policy are international students, so that they rarely have chances to meet or work together with domestic students, which also goes for interviewee P5 who is studying the Teaching Chinese as a Second Language. They have done some group tasks with peers, and generally had pleasant experiences in the collaboration.

“I feel it was really rewarding. Everyone was very serious about study and it was really nice to work together with them” (P2).

“Thankfully, most of my classmates were very easy to talk with. How I like it was that they have different perspectives, and they are all greatly cooperative” (P4).

“I could learn various perspectives from others’ thinking and behavior during the collaborative works” (P5).

The other two interviewees (P3 & P6) are among a minority of foreign students in their programs, who have had many communications and interactions with both international and domestic students. They get along very well with their peers and often support each other, with giving suggestions on study, as well as sharing feelings to release stress. In general, the interviewees had no problems in terms of peer relationships, except that some of them addressed the expectation of creating chances to enhance the links between international and domestic students from the university (P2, P4 & P5).

The role of the supervisor was significantly different between the English-taught master’s program and other Chinese-taught programs. In the former, supervisors were assigned primarily responsible for helping students in writing a master thesis on the basis of students’ thesis topics which were determined by their own interest and future career. They communicated more via emails rather than meeting up in person because the professors were very busy and often had very tight schedules. However, so far, the participants basically feel satisfied with what they have obtained from their supervisors.

“He has advised his instructions to my thesis, it was very clearly given through emails. After all I am more certain with what I want to do with my thesis. Even though we’ve never met each other personally, but yes, he is very helpful.” (P1)
“She is very interactive and friendly, and very expert in the topic like themes for my master thesis. She recommended me a lot of literatures, the reading materials that will be very helpful for me for constructing the framework of my thesis.” (P4)
“He’s been very helpful. Even though he didn’t give me specific guidelines on how to adopt methodology or something (like that), he really raised constructive questions and his questions really gave me, help me save my recognition in my proposal”. (P2)

For students in other Chinese-taught programs, supervisors were more like academic advisers who give guidance to students on how to practice academic engagement throughout the entire study period. Thus, besides thesis supervision, they “created opportunities for us to take more teaching practices and recommended few research works (e.g. publishing paper)” (P5), “encouraged us to think critically in daily learning” (P5 & P6), “inspired us to liberally express own opinions with strong and scientific evidences while doing research” (P6), and “always offered good suggestions and means to help us solve the problems in study” (P3, P5 & P6). The participants met their supervisors frequently, either through attending various academic activities like “reading meetings” organized by the professors (P3 & P5), or joining supervisor’s research projects and working in a laboratory as P6 was doing. The topics they chose to write for their thesis normally were relevant to the supervisors’ research areas, and sometimes could be advised or even directly assigned by supervisors. Nevertheless, none of the interviewees were asked to sign a contract with their supervisors, neither any written materials that precisely describe the responsibility of supervisors were found out.

The faculty members that all the participants often interacted with were the course lecturers, few of whom were felt difficult to effectively communicate with, for example, when they tried to reflect their stresses derived from too much readings and assignments in the class (P1 & P6). The program coordinator, as mentioned above, who is mainly in charge of administrative affairs for the master’s program in Public Policy, was most frequently contacted and was very liked by the students. Differently, in the Chinese-taught programs, normally there were a head teacher for the cohorts from the same class and several administrators in the school or department closely bonding with them.
Other staff in the university that students had frequent interactions with include officers working in the ISD, who are taking care of the international students more concerning their daily life rather than the academic aspects. However, participants commonly acknowledged that the ISD was very helpful, except sometimes the teachers were not likely to speak English.

Beyond formal classes, the aforementioned academic activities organized by the participants’ supervisors and departments were considered not only helpful to improve academic experiences, but also beneficial to enhance the interactions and relationships with peers and faculties. Then, in accordance with the introduction of student organizations and extracurricular activities on the webpage of ISD⁷, the host university “has more than a hundred student organizations which recruit new members during the month of September”. In addition, the ISD and each program’s department “organizes cultural events, trips, city tours, and various after-classes activities for international students. Students are encouraged to participate and could get the information of upcoming events on the websites or notice boards around campus” (Student Organizations & Extracurricular Activities | International Student Division, P University, n.d.).

One of the interviewees (P1) from the English-taught program has joined the student association of her home country, as well as the graduate student union of the school of government, even though these communities have nothing to do directly with the courses or the academy. She explained:

“Because I want to exercise more on the networking and also have the socialized type of my stay in China. So, I don’t want to focus only on the academics, I also want to build networks and make friends through these extra-curricular activities”. (P1)

On the other hand, she mentioned that her program will have a celebration at the end of the year (like a New Year gathering), which all the students, lecturers and faculty members from the School of Government will attend. But since the event has not

⁷ http://www.isd.pku.edu.cn/info/1490/2652.htm
occurred when she was interviewed, she was not sure about how it is like and whether it is helpful. Another student (P6) has been working as a student assistant in the ISD, so that she has been getting in touch with many teachers and other international students. The other interviewees did not take part in any associations or academic fellowships, while actually few of them were willing to do so to improve their academic social networks and professional experiences.

“I think the domestic master students and Ph.D. international students in our department may have their own academic communities, but we don’t have such community among international master students”. (P5)

“Maybe (that is) because of my limited Chinese language proficiency, also probably because I am very new here. I don’t really know what’s going on around me, maybe that’s one possible reason. Or maybe because, you know, we are inclined to our part and lost in our study, we don’t really know outside world. Maybe that’s why”. (P2)

5.5 Challenges of technological application and resources

The host university operates management information systems (MIS) for international students in areas such as application, registration and class enrollment. Also, students can log in on the online system of the library to reserve, renew and check the status of the books, as well as to get access to an abundance of digital resources (E-books, E-journals, theses and dissertations, databases, research tools, etc.) (P University Library, n.d.). The participants did not face large problems with using these online portals, except, again, that some of the instructions were given only in Chinese, which caused a bit of challenge for those students without Chinese knowledge.

“When we have to access the website to register online and select certain courses, its English version is kind of like less than the Chinese version will show you, so we had this hard time to access to the website. And because the course registration is a compulsory, and there is certain period of time that you have to register online, so, it’s like, the university has to look into, or put some improvement or anything like that”. (P4)

“In the online library of the university, at some point, there is something that is only written in Chinese, that is also a challenge for me.” (P1).

The three students from the Chinese-taught programs introduced an online teaching and learning system (no English version) where teachers can upload teaching materials like
syllabus and slides of the courses, assign homework and answer students’ questions. However, the system is not public for everyone, instead, it is available to students only if teachers want to use it and register the courses in the system, which was thought neither very practical nor popularly applied to some extent. In addition, one student (P5) proposed a suggestion of building platforms to video tape or stream live the classes in order to make it possible for the students who are absent of a class to have a chance to study or re-listen to it. Others in the English-taught program recalled the experience of a global classroom, which had several universities taking one class together over the screen. They admitted that this global classroom gave a good opportunity for connecting students and lecturers from many universities all over the world, but they still prefer learning through direct interactions, like having lectures presented in the class and discussions with teachers and classmates.

All students in P University are required to use a campus card to enter the library of the host university (Library Services | International Student Division, P University, n.d.). The library offers various facilities and services, such as self-checkout kiosks, copy rooms, digitalizing supports, as well as broad spaces (over 4000 seats) for self-study and group-discussion (P University Library, n.d.). These supports were generally perceived advanced and well-built by most of the interviewees, while one of them (P2) thought the library closes too early (10 pm) and hopes the working hours could be prolonged. Fortunately, there is a study room being established inside the international students’ apartment, which is available for 24 hours. Each department also has library and common public study areas, as well as classrooms that students can reserve for having meetings and discussions.

During study in China, WeChat (a Chinese social network service) was considered as an indispensable and powerful communication tool by all participants. Moreover, it is widely used as a study platform, for example, for doing group discussions, sharing class materials and instructions of course assignments, and sending notifications, while usually not for paper submission or other formal activities. One of important reasons is
the inaccessibility to some worldwide used media or email services due to the internet restrictions in the country, which was thought obviously inconvenient and challenging to the international students who have to install VPN. Additionally, some of the participants reported a few difficulties they have faced in using WeChat.

“Because I am also using the Proxy (Server), and sometimes the Proxy and the normal internet connection, they clash with each other, that is why I could lose my WeChat. Because if I turned on the Proxy, the WeChat can go off automatically.” (P1)

“One of the problems I find while using WeChat was that when you share documents in Words or PDF, WeChat cannot really save them for a very long time. But then it becomes inaccessible, like one week or two weeks later. It really bothers me when I have to access certain documents from the professors”. (P4)

“In the beginning, a very frequent problem that I had was that my WeChat got blocked around three times. It’s like when I was trying to scan a study or add a new friend. And whenever that happened to me it was very miserable because in China, everything is done in WeChat. I know some of my classmates also have such kind of experiences. But now we are doing better”. (P2)

Other problems with the technological services that a number of the interviewees stated include occasional failure of signing into the university email account, and unstable connection to university’s Wi-Fi network in a short time, which were found not serious matters though and were solved very quickly by the IT service center on campus.

In ISD’s website\(^8\), the information of general technologies applied in academic study and the way of using them, as well as where to go for help if one has problems have been elaborately introduced. The departments or programs also arranged their own orientations, of which the technological application featured a prominent part, to international degree students upon arrival. From some students’ viewpoints, it could be assumed that P University is constantly improving the implemented technologies with periodic maintenance. We can also see that the host university is dedicated to developing technological applications to facilitate to the new demands of students according to the actual situation, such as the diverse types of online courses that are thoroughly put into use in the COVID-19 pandemic period at present (News | P University, n.d.).

\(^8\) http://www.isd.pku.edu.cn/HOME/CURRENT_STUDENTS.htm
Finally, besides the five areas of academic challenges and corresponding institutional support identified in the theoretical frameworks (see Table 2 - Table 7), a couple of other challenges and expectations of international students have been presented in the interviews, some of which were much dependent on personal experiences and abilities. The first issue was the unclear academic information received from the university, which sometimes was not correct or would be changed in a short time. For example, under the column of Master Programs on the website of ISD⁹, there were two documents displaying the list of English-taught master’s programs in the year 2020. In addition, the application information for a few programs was separately attached respectively on the same webpage. Unfortunately, the programs shown in the three sites were only partially overlapping, as a couple of participants have stressed during interviews, which probably causes inconvenience and confusion to applicants. Consequently, interviewee P4 proposed that the university should work on providing students certain and exact information regarding the academic affairs.

In addition, one participant from the program of Public Policy felt there has been no time for doing anything else under the pressures from academic study, and hoped the length of the program could be increased to make students have better experiences in both study and life in China (e.g. travel around the city and in the country). Another participant (P5) was considerably depressed by the difficult balance between life and study in the first semester, and almost broke down because she could not find good solutions to relieve the strains. Therefore, she was looking for some help from the previous international students through sharing their experiences and suggestions (e.g. how the study is like here, how to choose courses, etc.) to the new international students in terms of academic adjustment in the transitional stage.

⁹ http://www.isd.pku.edu.cn/HOME/ADMISSION/Degree_Programs/Master_Programs1.htm
6 Discussion

The aim of this discussion chapter is to interpret the findings and examine the deep meanings that are grounded in the collected data on the basis of the theoretical frameworks presented in chapter 3. Firstly, it presents the main factors that influence the experiences of international students and the correlations between the key themes in the frameworks. Moreover, it discusses the effectiveness of the three institutional components in the supporting structure of the host university in addressing the academic challenges of international students and promoting their academic adaptations. In addition, a number of controversial issues “outside” the frameworks that have been found to be relevant to the findings are explicitly demonstrated. Lastly, some implications and recommendations are suggested to the case university.

6.1 The impacts of backgrounds on the experiences of international students

The motivations behind the decision of international students to study in China as their host country and select the host university are distinct and greatly dependent on individual backgrounds, ranging from family, to educational background, to working experiences. As for students originating from less developed regions compared to China, they may be intrigued to continue a higher education study in China in spite of the restrictions of language owing to the relatively more advanced level of education and higher reputations of several universities, which is believed to be beneficial to both personal qualifications and employability in the future. If interest in culture is the main factor for international students studying in China, learning the Chinese language is probably regarded as a necessary choice, and the Chinese-taught programs are more likely to be selected.

Furthermore, the prior personal experiences of international students and the contexts of higher education in their home countries no doubt have a great influence on their
experiences and perceptions during their studies in China. For instance, there are certain courses and knowledge that are not included in or focused on by the undergraduate courses in the same major in the home countries of international postgraduate students. Therefore, they certainly will be challenged when they have to study something totally new, especially if the subjects are of advanced level and require more fundamental knowledge as basis. Although the framework of disciplinary contents and conventions were considered relatively common in much cross-national comparative research (Becher, 1994, p.155), as Trowler (2009) argued, “context is the territory in which disciplines are performed” (p.8).

Other examples of personal experiences of international students that affect their experiences include the level of language ability before starting the study, whether they were trained in academic writing in previous study programs or working periods, what academic activities and assessment approaches they were accustomed to, and if they were familiar with certain technologies applied in the academic study. “These ‘pre-arrival’ factors impact significantly on international students’ adaptation potential” (Schartner & Young, 2016, p. 378).

Additionally, disciplinary differences also result in variations with regard to academic adjustment of international students, because “the divergent cultures of academic majors are important in shaping the patterns of academic engagement” (Brint, Cantwell & Hanneman, 2008, p.391). Thus, particular dimensions of certain challenges could be more significant to the students in some disciplines than others, such as the much greater stresses from a lack of language proficiency and statistics knowledge to the student enrolled in the psychology program, given, for example, that “the culture of engagement in the natural sciences focuses on improvement of quantitative skills through collaborative study” (Brint et al., 2008, p.383).
6.2 Correlations between language and other components of academic challenges

Studying a degree program in China, proficiency in the Chinese language could be seen as an essential factor that affects many aspects of the academic adaptation of international students. Besides the challenges directly derived from the difficulties in speaking, reading, understanding and writing Chinese, the language barrier could also constrain the study areas and data collection for academic writing, and limit students’ academic engagement beyond classes and activities within their own programs, such as conferences, seminars and public selective courses organized by other departments or the university. In addition, problems with using certain technologies are partially attributed to the lack of language ability.

Even for the students who are enrolled within English-taught programs, while a lack of knowledge of the Chinese language is not considered to be a big problem in terms of their own studies, it very likely challenges the communication with domestic students and staff on campus. This is caused by Chinese being the dominant language rather than English in the broader educational environment, which will further cause difficulties in building social networks in academia. We can take this issue from two contrary perspectives. On the one hand, in the process of internationalization, along with the increase of the number of international students and study programs, universities need to make the campus more international with respect to the use of English throughout the whole institution, as well as improving language training for both domestic students and staff. However, on the other hand, it is the international students’ own choice of studying in a non-English native speaking country, therefore, they are supposed to be responsible themselves for facing up to the reality of a low use of English in the academic environment.

With regards to the English proficiency of the international students who are studying English-taught programs, there also remains a large possibility that non-native English
speakers have difficulties using English in their academic studies. Consequently, except for the common challenges concerning language that are faced by the international students in Chinese-taught programs as mentioned above, these students might be more stressed if they at the same time don’t understand Chinese. To summarize, language proficiency (either Chinese or English) definitely is one of the most influential factors as regards the academic experiences of international students while studying in China.

6.3 The effectiveness of the three institutional components in supporting structure

The discussion of effectiveness in this section is mainly focused on whether the various experiences of international students overlap with the supporting structure of the host university that I find in the data, and whether the international students perceived the institutional support effective or not within the specific environment of the Chinese host university. It also compares these supporting practices and activities with what previous studies have argued should be the basic features of supporting structure.

If we look at the institutional support in addressing the academic challenges of international students from the regulative aspect in the theoretical framework built upon Scott’s (2014) three pillars (see Table 7), it can be seen that these supporting approaches are usually developed towards the broad category of challenges rather than helping students cope with specific problems or difficulties. Furthermore, it is uncertain about the actual effectiveness of these regulative elements on the improvement of students’ experiences. For example, the host university offers many English programs or double degree problems, which could be seen as supporting international students in terms of language barrier and pedagogical adaptation. However, the supportive effects of these English-taught programs are not necessarily applicable to the students from non-English speaking countries. In addition, the data that could demonstrate the number of international students being enrolled in English-taught master’s programs could not be
obtained via investigating documents. Therefore, it is difficult to assess how much international students benefit from these programs.

The findings of lacking English instructions in MIS systems and low efficiency of using some digital services imply that the application of technologies is implemented by the host university without considering the language weaknesses of their international students. This aligns with the argument of Habib et al. (2014, p.198) that international students could have problems with using non-human elements for assisting their learning processes because, as end-users, they are often excluded by the design of the technologies. Another point worthy of note is the responsibility of supervisors. This study’s findings indicate that a precise description in forms of rules or contracts is missing, even though the students have some recognition and think their supervisors are qualified and helpful. Nevertheless, the undefined and informal supervisory relationship was not regarded as a problematic issue by the interviewees in the study, which differs from what has been identified by McClure (2007) and Liu’s (2017) research.

One of the normative elements in terms of the language challenges of international students was analyzed through the English proficiency of teachers and domestic students, with a consensus on the satisfactory English of faculty members in English programs, while contradictory perceptions on the latter. The various forms of Chinese training programs, courses and activities for different types of international students were apparently acknowledged, although there were a few negative comments on their effectiveness. Research method courses that were set up in master’s programs were considered to be helpful for international students’ academic writing, but additional support such as writing workshops developed by the library, were rarely known by the international students, nor did they know whether these workshops were offered in English.

The development of English and double-degree programs made the curriculum structure, course contents and teaching and learning processes more international,
which was found to have improved the pedagogical adaptation of international students. Apparently, efforts have also been made to build academic networks for international students by the host university, through organizing collaborative tasks and activities. However, the interactions with domestic students were found to be the most challenging aspect to international students, and the host university was expected to pay more attention to this issue. Lastly, the instructions and guidance of the usage of various technologies were offered to international students through more than one channel, and in general, solutions could be effectively and quickly provided by the host university when the students met any problems.

Despite the fact that the Chinese language training programs were perceived to be insufficient in preparing proper language competence in the academic study of international students, there is no denying that the host university knows about the language challenges faced by international students and work on improving their language learning. For example, in the major of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language, teachers and students not only took part in teaching practices, but also conducted research for exploring more effective methods regarding the teaching and learning of Chinese language to international students. Moreover, the international students studying in this major might be able to play a positive role in this respect, because they know from their own experience about the difficulties that international students have in learning the Chinese language. When it comes to challenges in the area of academic writing, it is worth noting that in master’s degree programs, teachers clearly understood the probable difficulties of international students in searching for Chinese data and in using written Chinese language. The problems that students had in written tasks were recognized and addressed through teachers’ guidance and feedback.

Conducting teaching evaluation can be seen as an effective way to learn about the pedagogical challenges of international students, yet detailed information about the evaluation that students were required to do on completion of their courses was not available within this study. Moreover, according to interviewees’ responses, in some
cases, lecturers did not consider the possible pressures exerted on international students when they assign reading tasks or homework. Therefore, research on teaching and learning in this area, as well as in the area of teachers training programs can be argued to be a significant point for special focus by the host university. No indications that this is happening in practice were found in this study, amongst other things, due to limitations in data sources. In general, international students have kept a balanced relationship with their supervisors, who were thought to have awareness of their demand and challenges, as well as the effective way of providing academic advice. Nevertheless, there is a lack of cognitive practices such as investigation of the perceptions of international students on interacting with the people who are involved in their academic study. The host university has regularly updated and improved the implemented technologies, and also worked on the development of new technologies for international education, while it might still need to include the end-users (international students) in future technological designs as Habib et al. (2014) suggested in their study.

6.4 Controversial issues emerging in international student education

It is undeniable that the dramatic increase of the number of international students brings a lot of positive impacts on a host country’s higher education system and the host universities, for example, by attracting more skilled talent and best human capital from around the world, advancing campus internationalization, and generating university revenues, etc. (Rumbley, Altbach, & Reisberg, 2012). However, there are a few controversial issues were deduced concerning international student education in the case university in China according to the findings of this study.

Firstly, increasing numbers of English-taught international programs have been developed by the case Chinese university in order to attract more international students, and many of these programs usually only recruit international students. Domestic
students are not able to apply for these programs due to the different regulations and processes of admission to master’s programs for Chinese students. Moreover, sometimes one major or discipline is available to both international and domestic students, but the students are formally segregated. In some cases, there are even different study length and graduation requirements for international and domestic students. These facts have initiated debates on the issue of equality in terms of admission and graduation requirements, educational opportunities and learning resources. On the one hand, it could be unfair to domestic students who must take the National Graduate Entrance Exam (including both written tests and interviews) and pass the cut-off score to be enrolled to a master’s program, while international students only need to submit applications and will be granted admission through review of the required documents that they submitted. In addition, in the same major, the regular study length of the Chinese program usually is longer than the length of the international program, and more credits would be required for domestic students to graduate and obtain the degree. However, on the other hand, there also are restrictions on particular activities to international students, such as the chances of joining research projects or selecting courses from other programs, which could result in unequal opportunities to international students as well.

The international students who are enrolled in regular Chinese-taught degree programs are supposed to be exposed to exactly the same educational standards and reach the same outcomes as their Chinese counterparts. However, in practice they might still get extra help and concern from classmates and teachers, or even certain exemptions from the university. While it is reasonable to provide necessary assistance to international students, too much special treatment may lead to critical reactions by domestic students, as well as improper attitudes or under par performance by international students. There have actually been accusations that some of the international students have been made into a privileged group within Chinese universities, such as by being provided high financial support regardless of their learning outcomes, better accommodations than domestic students, and more thoughtful services for their lives (An & Chiang, 2015).
Additionally, the academic competence of the enrolled international students has also been perceived to be undermined by the pursuit of the growth in the number of international students and the resulting institutional revenues (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011, p.139). In this respect, there is a need for the adequate management of international students while providing them the effective support by the host universities. Moreover, it is essential to “maintain the cultural self-confidence and awareness, avoid the colonial mentality in the administration process” (Bentao, 2011, p.94), as well as truly realize the value of international education in Chinese universities.

6.5 Implications on the development of institutional support

Due to the significant role of language proficiency in the academic adaptation of international postgraduate students, the case university may need to pay more attention to the supporting practices with respect to this issue. For example, the department of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language in the university could focus more on how to effectively link the Chinese language training programs to the academic study of international students, rather than staying HSK test-oriented. When English-taught programs arrange Chinese language courses for international postgraduate students, the differences among the students when it comes to their Chinese language proficiency should be taken into consideration, instead of simply setting an elementary Chinese course as a mandatory task for all students. Alternative means could for example be either making the Chinese language course an elective, or providing different levels of language courses based on students’ demands. Moreover, if there is a lack of English competence among the international students in the English-taught programs, what kind of support the university could offer to them is also a noteworthy yet overlooked question.

In terms of challenges of pedagogical approaches, this study shows that it is highly important to state precisely the prerequisites for admitting international students to the postgraduate programs, such as required prior knowledge of the disciplinary domain
and the underlying subjects. In the case of some international students lacking basic knowledge in certain areas, the university can support those students to acquire the knowledge through providing opportunities to access relevant undergraduate courses before taking advanced postgraduate courses. Lecturers in international programs should be trained to raise their awareness of the “different patterns of learning and use of learning activities caused by cultural differences between countries” (Marambe, 2012, p.302), subsequently to understand the demands and difficulties of international students in their learning process, and continuously amend teaching methods on the basis of students’ feedback. For example, by adjusting reading assignments or informing students how to efficiently read and use the materials when the students have felt that the readings are too numerous to finish or irrelevant. In addition, Chinese-taught programs probably need to pay more attention to informing students of the requirements of the courses and their evaluation methods in advance, which is one of the crucial elements in Bigg’s constructive alignment approach that “could help promote students’ perception of the learning environment” (Wang et al., 2012, p.487).

As reflected both in the academic literature in this area and in the current study, international students are more likely to gather and interact among themselves, because most master’s programs have separate classes for international and domestic students, despite a desire by international students to have more interaction and communication with domestic students. In other words, the increase of international students has not really played the expected role in terms of achieving the goal of creating an international campus. In order to improve this weakness, the host university could work to make the courses and classes from different programs more inclusive, as well as organize more academic activities that could stimulate increased interaction between the Chinese and foreign students. Moreover, instead of building superficial connections, how to enhance the students’ personal sense of integration should be taken into consideration in the supporting activities because such integrative motivation has been suggested to play a positive role in the academic adaptation of international students (Yu, 2010).
Finally, the academic adjustment of international students is closely associated with their sociocultural and psychological adjustment and there are intertwined areas between them (Schartner & Young, 2016; Yu, 2010). This indicates that sometimes an academic challenge does not represent a pure problem of academic study. As a result, the institutional support for the academic adjustment of international students needs to be coordinated with the other two domains. In addition, the entire process of adjustment is strongly influenced by social connectedness (Schartner & Young, 2016), which implies that academic social networks, defined as one of the main categories of academic challenges in this study, should be prioritized by the host university when constructing its strategies for supporting international students.
7 Conclusion

This final chapter returns to the three research questions, and explicitly provides answers to these questions on the basis of the data analyses and findings of this study. It then presents a reflection on the study and proposes a few new thoughts drawn from fieldwork and findings. Finally, some limitations of the study and recommendations for further research on the same topic are presented.

7.1 Answers to research questions

Returning to the three main research questions of the current study, the answer for each of them can be summarized on the basis of the collected data and analysis as follows:

1. What are the main academic challenges that international postgraduate students face in the adjustment to a new educational context in China?

Firstly, the language barrier is one of the most significant academic challenges that international postgraduate students face in their adjustment to the educational context in the case Chinese university. This involves Chinese proficiency in communicating and academic writing for the international postgraduate students studying Chinese-taught programs, as well as the ability of students studying in English-taught programs to understand information and use necessary technologies. In addition, international postgraduate students also have experienced pressure from high workloads, difficulties in learning particular subjects because of their lack in basic knowledge from previous undergraduate study, and from the stresses of taking written exams. Other significant academic challenges include few opportunities for interactions with domestic students, and some practical problems with using the Chinese communications media.

2. What supporting practices do Chinese universities provide in responding to the academic challenges that international postgraduate students face?

A number of English-instructed and double-degree master’s programs have been
developed by the case university, which provide international students more chances to undertake postgraduate studies in a leading Chinese university without prior knowledge of the Chinese language. In addition, these programs make the educational processes slightly easier for international students to adapt within. There are various forms of language training for intentional postgraduate students from the department of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language, and academic writing courses arranged by the master’s programs covered in this study. The university library offers workshops and information literacy courses for assisting students in understanding how to use various kinds of library resources and services for facilitating learning activities. Usually, international postgraduate students are given a great deal of freedom to choose topics and the language for writing course papers and graduation theses. The selected host university and its departments or programs hold orientations to provide the necessary information about academic study and technological applications for international postgraduate students in the beginning of their studies. Various academic activities and associations are organized to enhance the interactions and relationships between international postgraduate students and their peers, supervisors and faculties. Lastly, MIS and many technologies that are applied in the academic study of international postgraduate students are regularly updated according to students’ demands, and if there are any problems with using those tools, they can easily seek help from the IT service center on campus.

3. How do international postgraduate students perceive the supporting practices provided by Chinese universities for their academic adaptation?

The international postgraduate students have reported positive perceptions of the English competency of faculty, courses for helping their Chinese ability and academic writing, library resources, and the pedagogical approaches of the English-taught programs. Some areas that could be improved by the case Chinese university include the providing English versions of information and technological instructions, and responding more adequately to students’ demands and the need to adjust their
workloads. International students in the Chinese-taught master’s programs feel that more attention could be paid to supporting them with obtaining particular knowledge in the disciplinary domain, as well as effectively preparing Chinese proficiency for graduate studies. Diverse academic activities, various school facilities and library resources, and efficient IT services that the selected host university offered are generally perceived by the international students to be helpful to their academic adaptation, while they hope for more support in building connections and interactions with domestic students.

7.2 Reflections on the study

International mobility of students into China is a very important index to measure the internationalization of Chinese higher education (Bentao, 2011, p.85). Chinese universities are following a path of increasing their number of international students, while developing various supporting strategies and practices at the same time. However, what the international students actually experience during their academic adjustment and how they perceive the supporting practices offered by the host institutions are meaningful areas which require further investigation. Additional knowledge in this area would not only be helpful for gaining a better understanding of international students’ adaptation in the new educational environment, but would also be beneficial for universities’ decision-making with regard to changes and growth in the supporting structures and services for international students. The perceptions of international students on institutional support could also be regarded as one of the major factors influencing international students’ attitudes when sharing their experiences with peers in their home countries, which are suggested to significantly impact future enrollment trends (Lee, 2010).

In fact, instead of heavily relying on institutional support or expecting changes from the host university, this study suggests that many international students tend to be independent and deal with many of their academic challenges by themselves. How can
this be interpreted? The first possible explanation is that the system of Chinese higher education is created primarily in line with the demands of Chinese students, and thus the outsiders who decided to enter should take responsibility for their own adaptations. A second interpretation might suggest that since the academic experiences of international postgraduate students are highly diverse due to their different backgrounds, it is not easy for the host universities to understand how to best address the challenges that they face (Lin & Scherz, 2014, p.28). Therefore, it might be unrealistic to expect that institutional support will cover all of the dynamic academic challenges of international students. Additionally, the question can be raised as to whether it is valid to expect that international students should entirely depend on their host universities to improve their academic experiences.

Ultimately, no matter how perfect the supporting structure established by the host universities is, it will not function without the initiative of the people involved: the active engagement of international students, university staff and domestic students. The implementation of institutional support can also contribute to build an international environment on campus, which has been suggested as an effective way to strengthen “internationalization at home” for the host universities (Bentao, 2011). Nevertheless, in order to achieve this purpose, supporting strategies should adhere to the principle of optimizing the allocation of resources rather than merely satisfying international students’ demands, and both providers and participants of the supporting activities should develop a spirit of international understanding.

7.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

There are some aspects of the framework of academic challenges derived from existing theories and literature (see chapter 3) that did not adequately describe the Chinese environment. For example, since the role of supervisors in the international English-taught master’s programs is focused primarily on the graduation theses of international students, the main aspects of the supervisory relationship intended to be investigated in
this study did not really suit these cases. Some elements in the framework of technological application, such as the exam system, equipment used in classrooms, and online learning platforms were not widely applied in the Chinese universities. In terms of challenges of pedagogical approaches, the dimension of research might be only applicable for groups of international postgraduate students from particular disciplinary areas rather than all international programs.

Further, as explained in the methodology chapter, the study intended to include the university’s perspective through interviews with the administrators for a more comprehensive exploration of institutional supports, which turned out to be impossible in the end. Therefore, despite relevant data being collected from various documents in addition to student interviews, there could be some remaining components of the university’s supporting structure that have not been captured by this study because they are either not displayed in the written materials, or are not open to the public.

Another issue is that the interviewees in the current study are mainly studying in majors within the humanities and social science, while the international students from STEM fields probably face divergent academic challenges. In order to obtain a thorough view of the experiences of international students in Chinese universities, the experiences of students within a wide variety of disciplines should be further investigated. Moreover, comparative research across different academic fields could be conducted to elicit insight into more targeted supporting practices that could address the academic challenges of international students.

Finally, the findings of this study could provide some relevant insights for the further development of international education at both the case university and other Chinese universities. However, because of the variations in terms of educational environments and institutional structures and features, the academic experiences of international postgraduate students and institutional support structures and activities are probably very different from university to university. Obviously, it is not valid to generalize the results of this study to the entire Chinese higher education system. Therefore, future
studies could expand their scope towards the academic adjustments of international students in more Chinese universities with larger populations.
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## Appendices

### a. Interview guide

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<tr>
<th>Thematic block</th>
<th>Main aspect</th>
<th>Example questions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language proficiency (5-7 minutes)</strong></td>
<td>General level</td>
<td>Are you taking an English or Chinese-taught program? Language requirement?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What was your language competency before being admitted to the program?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>What do you think about following the lectures?</td>
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<td>Is the content or the language do you think causing the difficulties?</td>
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<td>Speaking</td>
<td>How often and in what occasions do you communicate with your peers and faculties?</td>
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<td>Are there any activities making you feel stressed or worried about your speaking ability?</td>
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<td>Do you often do discussion inside/outside class and how well it usually goes?</td>
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<td>Reading</td>
<td>How many literatures do you usually have to read for your study?</td>
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<td>How long it takes you to finish the reading works?</td>
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<td>How do you find the provided information regarding academic activities in university’s website or other places?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Perceptions concerning institutional supports</td>
<td>What supporting activities do you know that are provided by the university for these challenges regarding language? How do you think they can be improved?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Writing (5-7 minutes)</strong></td>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>Which do you think is the most difficult thing in terms of writing skills? (Grammar, vocabulary, structure, transaction, or others?)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Academic socialization</td>
<td>What special discourses do you know in academic writing of your field?</td>
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<td>Academic literacy</td>
<td>How important and difficult do you think of using examples for supporting your arguments/being logical and critical? How do you collect sources related to your disciplinary knowledge?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions concerning institutional supports</td>
<td>What differences regarding writing conventions/evaluative standards between studying here and your previous studying experiences? What’s your understanding of authorial identities/plagiarism?</td>
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<tr>
<td>T&amp;L</td>
<td>How different is the teaching processes in this university compared to your previous university? What academic activities do you usually have in/out classes and what challenges do you face while doing these activities? How many study works do you have for one course/every week?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>What/how many research works have you been doing since you started your master program? What inputs have you generated so far? How do you get access to research projects and what resources can you receive?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>What is the curricular structure of your program? What courses do you take and what outcomes are you expected to get? How many courses/credits are you required for graduation?</td>
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<td>Assessment</td>
<td>What kind of assessment methods do the courses normally adopt? (exam/essay/presentation, etc.) How difficult do you think of these assessments? What results and feedbacks did you get?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions concerning institutional supports</td>
<td>What supports have you ever got from the university when you have problems in you learning activities? What other practices do you suggest university to do in terms of these problems?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social networks (5-7 minutes)</td>
<td>Peer relationships</td>
<td>How do you get along with your peers? Where are they from? What tasks have you done together and what are your comments on the collaboration?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory relationship</td>
<td>How often and for what purposes do you meet your supervisor? How close do you think of your relationship? What roles do you think your supervisor plays and what do you expect from him/her in terms of your academic development?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with others</td>
<td>Besides your peers and supervisor, who else do you often get in touch/feel important or helpful to your study? In what aspects and ways? Have you ever joined any academic communities? How are your experiences and interactions with the members there?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions concerning institutional supports</td>
<td>What practices do you think that university can do for improving the relationships with these people? Who do you usually go to for help?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology (5-7 minutes)</td>
<td>Academic MIS</td>
<td>What problems have you had while using the application/ registration/ course/exam/ library system of the university?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T&amp;L technologies</td>
<td>What equipment do you have in classroom/lab and how do you find of using them? How easily do you get access to digital resources/apply online learning platforms?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>What tools do you often use for communication and how effective do you feel? What problems have you had when you get technological services/use physical artefacts in the university?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions concerning institutional supports</td>
<td>How do you think these technologies could be improved in helping your learning?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section 4: Supplementary information
Among all these categories, which do you think is the most challengeable aspect in your academic experiences in China? Besides these elements, what other academic challenges have you ever met during studying at the university? Which aspect(s) of academic challenges do you feel that should be paid more attention on by university, and why?

Section 5: Closing
Expressing the gratefulness; Asking whether the participants have more questions or words to say.
### b. Spread sheet of interviews in Chinese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic block</th>
<th>Main aspect</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language proficiency</strong></td>
<td><strong>General level</strong></td>
<td>requirement of Chinese language: HSK 180 (no less than 60 for each, reading/listening/writing)</td>
<td>requirement: HSK level 6 (over 210, normally 250), oral exam advanced level; no requirement for English language, basic English for reading or speaking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Listening</strong></td>
<td>no problem with following lectures</td>
<td>generally, has no problem, but sometimes find difficult to start with if the subject is quite new or not familiar. (see example in text).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Speaking</strong></td>
<td>no problem with communicating with others</td>
<td>generally, has no problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>not so many readings before classes; it's alright; review literatures/books if didn't understand the lectures.</td>
<td>Usually teachers give a syllabus before the first class and some additional readings after classes. The number of readings are depending on teachers, not so many readings because teachers normally chose highly relevant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Writing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Writing skills</strong></td>
<td>no big problem</td>
<td>Most difficult thing: used to narrative writing rather than thesis which is more standard and formal; it requires written language; not very good at the sequences, connection and relations between paragraphs, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Academic socialization</strong></td>
<td>the style of writing in discipline is curved; need to make the contents being packed;</td>
<td>Differences between undergraduate study: for master thesis, it needs more self-thinking. Sources: books in library; journals in CNKI; searching key words in other websites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Academic literacy</strong></td>
<td>difficult of writing abstract; it covers many information, but has little space;</td>
<td>Plagiarism: teachers have emphasized the issue and explained the duplicate checking; taught how to cite others’ statements/arguments;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Perceptions concerning institutional supports</strong></td>
<td>have academic writing course; no extra language training course</td>
<td>Writing courses, feel helpful for writing skills. Examples: how to use marks, learn about the structures or connections through reading and comparing previous theses; only one semester and instructions in the class, still needs personal practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pedagogy</strong></td>
<td><strong>T&amp;L</strong></td>
<td>have some activities like give presentations about one topic</td>
<td>theory course and practice course (e.g. pedagogical skills/technics, see text for more details). Challenges: do not have much experiences on teaching so that sometimes cannot consider from students’ side or expect students’ reaction while designing teaching structure (merely design it with own idea). (see example in text). Workloads: think there were too many courses in the first semester (new entry in the environment), felt too</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>relatively too many courses; don't have time to do my own research works; not so many formal research projects</th>
<th>have participated few forum or guest lectures, but no other research works (publishing paper or project of supervisor); other students: very little for international students, but domestic students engaged a lot from the first year.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>requires 40 credits within 3 years; relatively too many courses;</td>
<td>Graduation requirements: over 30 credits + 4 credits of intern + thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Course structure: Chinese-taught core courses + selective courses (Chinese/English)</td>
<td>time for core courses could be decided/adjusted by students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Normally term assignments; not give information about assessments/presentations in advance; need to learn new knowledge for finishing some assignments; written exams might cause more stresses; doesn't care too much about results; generally satisfied with the results; have to retake the course and exam if failed; cannot retake if passed; some teachers give feedbacks (usually for electronical assignments).</td>
<td>Assessment approaches: few written exams + paper written exam: a bit stressful, but it is not difficult if you can memorize what have learned, result could be expected and objective; paper: it's difficult because it takes time to think and construct, and the result is pretty much depending on teachers' opinion, is more subjective and unpredictable. Results: the standards and requirements are higher in the case university, plus peers are outstanding students, so just try best and make efforts, but not expect high grades (it’s okay if the grade is not that bad). Feedbacks: Normally will not get feedbacks automatically or actively from teachers, but can ask for feedbacks if students want to know how to improve, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions concerning institutional supports</td>
<td>have opportunities to add courses if didn't succeed selecting the expected courses; have change and cancel period for course selection; contact instructors to get the approval and hand in application to the department.</td>
<td>If not satisfied with the results, can ask to check the answer sheet if it was written exam; usually no approaches to appeal if it was paper because the results are subjective. If have problems, discuss with peers and help each other, or ask for helps from supervisor, or other lectures and head teachers/class advisors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networks</td>
<td>not so many collaboration tasks; have classes together with both Chinese and international students; have many communications and interactions; helpful because can give suggestions, share feelings and reducing stresses;</td>
<td>Peers: all are international students, most are Asian students, two Chinese students with American nationality. Many collaboration works: could learn various perspectives from others’ thinking and behavior; Don’t communicate that much with domestic students,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Supervisory relationship

- didn't meet up many times; but will take up time if I request or have questions; the role of supervisor: give guidance on how to practice the research; recommend literatures and books to read;
- Supervisory relationship: meet up more frequently in the first year at the “reading meeting” (feel helpful, one topic each time, share each other’s idea) organized by supervisor for the first year student; start thesis writing since the third semester, supervisor gave comments and suggestions after submission of the proposal; also meet up frequently but it depends more on supervisors.
- My supervisor often is busy with both teaching and management working; but if I need his help, he often replies quickly and takes up time to meet up.
- Responsibilities: thesis supervision; help publishing thesis (other students); interested in teaching and create us opportunities to take more teaching practices; recommend/encourage few research works.

### Interaction with others

- small study groups like reading meetings/workshops organized by faculties; WeChat study platform; seminars; no many communications with other departments
- Academic community: guest lecturers organized by department (discipline); domestic master students in the department may have community; Ph.D. international students also have their own academic community.
- Department administrative office: 2-3 administrators sever for master and Ph.D. students.

### Perceptions concerning institutional supports

- these activities are beneficial to study; helpful to interactions with peers and faculties; can get access to some rare reading materials that I cannot find myself; the methods and focuses in seminars can help my study; usually ask supervisor for help if have problems; supervisor can give good suggestions and means; help solving problems in time;
- Should make the more opportunities for international students to communicate and interact with Chinese students, create chances to enhance the links and interactions between them. Because now except for few selective courses, they barely take courses together and rarely get in touch with local Chinese students.

### Academic MIS

- library is conservative; it's difficult to get access to some ancient/classical reading materials/textbooks in the library
- no big problems, expect sometimes the systems were being maintained; if have problems, administrative office will help solving them;

### T&L technologies

- no other equipment or technologies (e.g. online courses) applied
- T&L platform: teaching materials and slides, but not public for everyone, only courses within the department and some public courses from other departments;

### Technology

- WeChat is not suitable for deep discussions/communications; more face to face communications in person; can book a classroom in the department; discuss in a vacant classroom or cafeteria; no special places for discussion/group study provided
- Library: digital resources: well-built, can find both international and domestic resources; can download many software for learning; can search for abundant of theses and journals easily; can reserve books conveniently. Basically, could be used very well without any problems.

### Others

- Communicating tools: WeChat for emergent issue or
by school; library is on repair working; many of resources cannot be used right now.

| Perceptions concerning institutional supports | go to the reserved library by following the teachers from my faculty; students can visit the reserved library together through submitting application with stating the reasons; students have different research directions and demands; teachers don't have much time available. |
| | IT center could provide supports when have problems with using these technologies. Expectation: Build platforms to video record or live the classes in order to make it possible for the students who are absent of the class have chances to learn, or to re-listen to the class. Have considered give suggestions to the university, but feel it might be possible inside the department, but difficult for other public classes. |

| Supplementary information | getting access to the classical reading materials; expect university paying more attention on meeting the demands of students; students want to be more flexible to use the materials; |
| | Academic writing/thesis writing. Firstly, it’s difficult to write in a Foreign language (written version in Chinese); Secondly, feel struggling with standardized writing (how to write standardly). The time for writing thesis is fine to finish because the topic and methods (classroom observations and questionnaires) are not that complicated. |

| Expectation from university | Hope for some helps from the previous students through sharing their experiences and suggestions to the new international students in terms of academic adjustment in the transitional stage. |
c. Information letter and consent form

Are you interested in taking part in the research project “The Academic Experiences of International Students Studying in Chinese Higher Education”?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to get a better understanding on how Chinese higher education, as becoming one of the major suppliers to global students, is handling the significant increase in international students as a specific aspect of internationalization. In this letter, we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project
This master’s thesis attempts to analyze the academic experiences of international postgraduate students in China and relate these experiences to the support capacity of universities, with the aim to increase our understanding of the extent to which Chinese universities are fully prepared for providing international education in an appropriate way. Specifically, the current study examines the challenges that international postgraduate students face while adjusting to a new academic environment in Chinese universities, on the one hand, as well as the supporting strategies that universities create to facilitate the academic adaptation of international postgraduate students and how these work in practice on the other hand. The main objectives in this are to find out the existing problems and weaknesses, deliver valuable information and propose meaningful suggestions for Chinese universities to improve the experience of international students. The research questions of the study are as follows:
1. What are the main academic challenges that international postgraduate students face in the adjustment to a new educational context in China?
2. What supporting practices do Chinese universities provide in responding to the academic challenges that international postgraduate students face?
3. How do international postgraduate students perceive the supporting practices provided by Chinese universities for their academic adaptation?

Who is responsible for the research project?
The University of Oslo is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?
This study plans to conduct interviews to 8-10 international students who are taking master’s programs in a leading Chinese university. The nationalities of student interviewees are expected to be Asian and European countries since they account for
the largest population among all international students in both China and the case universities. Student interviewees are preferred to be the ones who have received their higher education in other countries before moving to China, thereby the experiences of studying a graduate program in Chinese universities are brand new to them.

**What does participation involve for you?**
The in-depth semi-structured interviews to international students are adopted to collect data regarding the academic challenges that international students face during their studies in the case university. The questions in the interviews are open-ended and cover five categories of academic challenges, which are language proficiency, academic writing, pedagogical challenges, challenge of social networks, and technological challenge. The interviews will be conducted remotely via online calling services (e.g. Skype, WeChat, etc.). The audios of the interviews will be recorded with the app Nettskjema-diktafon on smart phones, which is an official recording device nominated by UiO. Each interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes.

**Participation is voluntary**
Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

**Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data**
We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

- You can choose whether to participate anonymously or not. If you want to be anonymous, your name will not be shown in the records and reports of the project. If you would like to be a contributor to the research, the records in the archive will show your name and the research reports will present you as one of the people who have contributed.
- Besides the researcher, the supervisor of this master’s thesis, Prof. Peter Maassen (Department of Education, UiO) also has access to the data gathered in this project.
- The interview will be recorded (audio) with the app Nettskjema-diktafon on smart phones. The audio records will be directly sent to the safe storage TSD (Service for Sensitive Data) in accordance with the Norwegian privacy regulation.

**What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?**
The project is scheduled to end in May, 2020. The results will be reported in this master’s thesis, and may be presented in academic journals. The audio records will be stored for the future research in an online digital archive at the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) for duration of ten years till 1, January, 2030.
Your rights
As long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?
We will process your personal data based on your consent. Based on an agreement with University of Oslo, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?
If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- University of Oslo via Gui Li (email: liguigrace@gmail.com or +4792516949).
- Our Data Protection Officer: Maren Magnus Voll (email: personvernombud@uio.no)
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,
Gui Li

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Consent form
I have received and understood information about the project “The Academic Experiences of International Students Studying in Chinese Higher Education” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent to participate in an online interview and for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. May, 2020.

__________________________________________________________________________________________

(Signed by participant, date)