UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

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Service quality and intercultural adjustment: exploring and comparing the perceptions of international students and academic staff of a UK Russell Group university

by

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Education

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SERVICE QUALITY AND INTERCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT: EXPLORING AND COMPARING THE PERCEPTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC STAFF OF A UK RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITY

Xiaotong Zhu

The importance of understanding international students' perceptions of the quality of their academic and intercultural experience has been increasingly recognised in higher education context. Previous studies have largely focused on a single perspective. This research presents a more comprehensive picture of service quality of UK higher education and international students' intercultural adjustment in the United Kingdom through investigating and comparing both students' and academics' perspective. A mixed-methods convergent parallel deign was implemented in a Russell Group university, with quantitative survey data collected from a convenient sample of 139 Chinese students and 27 academics, and qualitative interview data from a group of Chinese students (N=5) and academics (N=6). Both the quantitative and qualitative findings show that the perceptions of academics and Chinese students may be very different, even at the same university. There is also evidence for dynamics in these perceptions: 1) the perceptions are changeable over time; and 2) the service quality regarding the academic factor has a positive relationship to sociocultural adjustment.

These findings have important implications for various higher education stakeholders across the university: it is critical to promote mutual and regular dialogue between academics and international students to make sure that they have a shared understanding and that the dynamics in their perceptions is captured. The findings also suggest caution when assuming, as is prevalent currently, that service quality of higher education and international students' intercultural adjustment can be comprehensively understood and efficiently improved from just one side's point of view.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Xiaotong Zhu, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Service quality and intercultural adjustment: A mixed-methods study exploring and comparing the perceptions of the Chinese international students and academic staff of a UK Russell Group university

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission:

Signed: ....

Date: ....

Acknowledgements

Ever since I commenced my PhD journey, a question has haunted me in many of my sleepless nights: can I complete the thesis and how would I feel when I complete?

After wondering for more than three years, I finally arrived at this moment of being able to give myself an answer: yes, I can complete the thesis; and that is why now I am writing the acknowledgements. How do I feel about this moment, which is, coincidently, at night? I feel warm and hopeful of a brand new day.

I feel warm, because I am well aware that many kind people have offered their support to me during these years. Without their support, I would not have enjoyed and benefited from the journey as much as I actually have.

I wish foremost to thank my supervisors – Professor Martin Dyke and Dr Chris Downey – for their advice, guidance and support throughout my PhD journey. They treated me not only as a student, but also a colleague. They provided me with much encouragement when I was at loss, and always stimulated critical thinking of my own.

I also want to acknowledge the support from my parents, even though they will probably not be able to read this thesis due to their limited command of English. I know they were questioned, many times, by their relatives and their friends: what is the point of supporting me to acquire a PhD? I am not sure how they answered that question, but I am very grateful that they gave me their strong backing during this journey, as they have always done.

I feel hopeful of a brand new day. At this moment, I have two hopes. I hope the completion of this thesis is a fresh start, rather than an end, and I hope my first hope is not just a hope.

I would like to answer myself: yes, you have completed this thesis, but *keep calm and carry on*.

Definitions and Abbreviation

E-E gap: Expectation minus Experience gap

HE: Higher Education

HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England

HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency

IA: Intercultural Adjustment

IPA: Importance–Performance Analysis

I-P gap: Importance minus Performance gap

P-E gap: Performance minus Expectation gap

RQ: Research Question

SERVQUAL: Service Quality scale developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988).

SQ: Service Quality

THE: Times Higher Education

1. Introduction

Internationalisation is changing the world of Higher Education (Knight, 2008, p.1).

The term “internationalization” implies different things to different people in different contexts (De Wit, 2011). Trying to provide a more focused and clearer definition for the higher education (HE) context in particular, Knight (1994) proposes the following:

> Internationalization of higher education is the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching/learning, research and service functions of a university or college. An international dimension refers to a perspective, activity or service which introduces or integrates an international/intercultural/global outlook into the major functions of an institution of higher education. (p.3)

In a later book chapter, Knight (1999) further suggests that an institution can embed the international dimension in HE by implementing diverse strategies. These strategies may be divided into four levels: the programme/teaching level (launching internationalisation activities such as cross-cultural training and student exchange programmes), the research level (e.g., supporting and promoting international conferences and international research cooperation), the external relations level (establishing partnerships with other institutions within and beyond the country) and the extra-curricular level (e.g. organising student clubs and communities). In the past three decades, the integration of internationalisation into HE has led to a dramatic increase in student mobility (THE, 2018). The United Kingdom occupies a strong position in the international student market, accounting for approximately 12.6% of the global international student recruitment by 2015 (Welikala, 2015). It is one of the top destinations for international students (HESA, 2014; OCED, 2014; THE, 2018). Since 2010, China has become the largest exporter of international students to the United Kingdom (British Council, 2018; Department for Business, innovation & Skills and Department for Education, 2013). According to the most recent statistics (HESA, 2017), the number of Chinese students studying in UK HE is far exceeds those of any other nationality.

One main approach adopted by popular destination countries, such as the United Kingdom, to respond to the internationalisation of HE and to the large influx of internal students is by paying increasing attention to the quality of the HE offering and to the international student experience. Substantial numbers of studies have focused on international students’ satisfaction with HE quality (e.g., Angell et al., 2008; Hill, 1995; Joseph and Joseph, 1997) and their intercultural experiences in the host country, in the hope of keeping that country competitive in the international student market and supporting international students’ success in their overseas study.

However, one major problem in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 is that HE quality and international experience have been mainly discussed in a one-way direction; that is, largely from universities/academics to international students (HE quality) or from international students to the academics of the host universities (intercultural experience). There is less research effort to investigate the 'dual carriageway' of the two parties' understanding of these two aspects. Only a little research has attempted to answer the key question: are international students and academics of host universities actually sharing a similar understanding of what constitutes quality HE and what greatly influences intercultural experience? It appears that most previous researchers have left this question unanswered. The prevailing one-way direction of communication has led to a noticeable gap whereby international students are usually not clear about what is expected by the academics of host universities or about teachers' observations and interpretations of their intercultural experience. From the academics' perspective, what should also be questioned are: 1) How can teachers efficiently help with students' academic success if they do not share a common understanding with their students about the academic requirements in UK HE?; 2) How can academics provide support that genuinely meets the needs of international students if they do not understand sufficiently international students' HE expectations and the actual main challenges of learning, living and working overseas?

Another major mystery that the current literature appears to be less keen to unveil is the dynamic nature of individuals' understandings of these two aspects. Many studies included in Chapter 2 tend to talk about international students' perceptions of HE quality and their experience in the host country under the assumption that these perceptions are stable over time. The existing literature on HE quality rarely recognises the possibility that individuals' perceptions may change over time for various reasons. It is also well accepted that international students' perceptions of these two aspects are isolated, rather than being closely related to each other. Therefore, what has also been under-investigated is whether international students' evaluations of HE offerings by the host university are influenced by their general intercultural experience in the destination country, or vice versa.

The special focus of this research is on the largest national group of international students (i.e., Chinese students) pursuing HE at UK Russell Group universities and academic staff teaching at those universities. Endeavouring to address the above-mentioned gaps, this study investigated two key concepts – service quality and intercultural adjustment – with the engagement of not only Chinese international students but also academics from the same university. The two concepts will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 2.

It should be noted that the term 'quality' is "multi-dimensional, multi-level and dynamic" (Vlasceanu et al., 2004, p.46). As discussed in section 2.2.2.6, the attempt to unify the definition of 'quality' in HE contexts is also challenging or even problematic (Eagle and Brennan, 2007; Harvey and Green, 1993). For the current study, the understanding of quality leans toward the work of Harvey and Green (1993) where the quality of HE is posited to be based on the perspectives of different stakeholders. The two researchers highlight that the perceptions of different stakeholders on the quality of HE can be (or will be) quite different. The focus of this study is to investigate two particular stakeholders' (i.e., students and academics) views of HE quality, with an adoption of the concept of service quality as an indicator of HE quality. For the current research, the two phrases 'quality of HE services' and 'service quality of HE' share the same meaning and will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. It also regards 'quality of learning/teaching experience' as the level of students'/teachers' engagement primarily with the components involved in learning and teaching process and possibly with other HE-related features (Harvey, 2014). According to Mash and Hocevar (1991) and Toland and De Ayala (2005), the teacher-student relationship is a crucial part of the teaching and learning process and its quality can greatly influence students'/teachers' perceptions of the quality of their learning/teaching experience.

While being cautious about borrowing the concept of service quality from marketing research, this study is critical of treating HE as an ordinary service and international students as traditional customers. Section 2.2.2.4 covers the researcher's awareness of the existing debate on the appropriateness of applying service quality to HE research. However, this research argues that carefully bringing a service perspective to HE context could be beneficial and that HE has great potential to be regarded as a special service. It embodies the main characteristics of a service proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), while also possessing its own uniqueness, distinguishing itself from a traditional service. Shortly, sections 1.2 and 1.3 will elaborate further on these arguments.

This research represents an attempt to display, by many means, the dynamic nature of both student and academic participants' perceptions of the two concepts: examining the influences of time on the two parties' perceptions, tentatively linking the perceptions of service quality to those of intercultural adjustment, and conducting individual interviews to enrich the survey data.

This study intends to present some insightful evidence to challenge the prevailing assumption that Chinese students and academics who are learning/teaching at the same university automatically share the same understandings and expectations when they appear to discuss the same topic. Instead of looking at HE quality and Chinese students' intercultural experience from a single point of view, it strives to convince key stakeholders within universities (e.g., students, academics, marketing officers and the university leadership team) that stimulating mutual and transparent communications to bridge the gap between Chinese students' and academics' perceptions is essential. The two parties' academic experience and Chinese students' intercultural experience would be more efficiently improved with a promotion of such communication. This research also expects to make these stakeholders more aware of the dynamic nature of individuals' perceptions, so that in future they may have a more enduring commitment to and more active participation in supporting mutual communication between Chinese students and academics at host universities.

1.1 Background to this research

1.1.1 The wider context

Due to economic globalisation and knowledge economy, the trend for internationalisation is inexorable and increasingly important in the field of Higher Education (Jiang, 2010; Knight, 2008). Summarising rationales and incentives for the internationalisation of HE, Knight and de Wit (1995) point out that it would bring about economic, political, cultural and educational benefits. Universities and other HE institutions are strongly advised to give priority to the combination of the international dimension and HE (Pickert, 1992). However, Parson and Fidler (2004) provide a warning concerning the intenationalisation process in HE by pointing out that there may be 'deinternationalisation' emerging – a reverse process of internationalisation. This new term suggests that evidence can be found for a decrease in overall international activities undertaken by UK universities, particularly regarding the number of UK students choosing to study overseas, levels of language learning and competition for jobs abroad. A further concern was raised in the report by the House of Commons, suggesting that there is even more significant uncertainty in the internationalisation of UK higher education, given the UK's impending withdrawal from the EU (Carmichael et al., 2017). The International Student Survey (2017) launched by Hobsons showed that 36% of more than 60,000 prospective international students felt less likely to pursue HE in the UK and the most common reason for this was the UK voting to exit the EU.

Along with increasing recognition of the importance of the international dimension in HE, the number of students choosing to pursue their studies in a foreign country has seen a sharp rise. In 2012, there were approximately 4 million international students undertaking HE outside their home country (OECD, 2012). This figure, according to a later report of the OECD (2014), was only 0.8 million in 1975. Dramatically, it had more than doubled from 2.1 million in 2000 to 4.5 million in 2010 and was anticipated to reach 7 million by 2020. However, by 2013 the statistics indicated that more than half of the total international students are dispersed to certain OECD countries (OECE, 2015). To be specific, the United States accounts for the largest proportion of all international students worldwide (19%), with United Kingdom (10%), Australia and France (6% respectively) following (ibid.).

As the second largest exporter of HE, the United Kingdom has witnessed a major influx of international students in recent years. The growth in the number of international students to the United Kingdom may be attributed primarily to its renowned standard of education and academic qualifications that are recognised the world over (Russell, 2005). The quality of education plays a remarkable role in international students' decision-making process (Gray et al., 2003; OECD, 2015).

For example, many international students perceive that a host country and university with a good reputation and high rankings for HE quality is more likely to award an academic qualification that is widely recognised by employers; hence they will have an advantage in their future career (Angell et al., 2008; Hampton, 1993; OECD, 2015; Prasad and Jha, 2013).

1.1.2 Chinese students in UK HE

This study focuses on UK HE, which has attracted a large number of international students, especially from China. According to OECD (2014), the United Kingdom, as the second most popular destination country, had a 12.6 per cent share of the internationally mobile student market in 2012, second only to the United States (16.4%). HESA (2014) showed that 18% of the United Kingdom HE enrolment in academic year 2012/13 was of international students (from both EU and Non-EU), which means nearly one in five students in the United Kingdom were from another country.

A report by the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and Department for Education (2013) shows that there has been a noticeable change in the countries sending international students to pursue HE in the United Kingdom. In 2000, Europe was the largest source of international students for UK HE, and Europeans represented half of the cohort; Asia made up merely one-third. The top sending country was Greece, sending 13 per cent of the total international students in the United Kingdom. The report also demonstrated that China became the largest single source country from 2010, given that Chinese students constituted 14 per cent of the total international students in UK HE that year. HESA (2014) shows that in academic year 2012/13, the proportion of Chinese students has gone up to 33 per cent of the newly arrived international students to the United Kingdom. It has been predicted that the global demand for international HE will see a dramatic growth from 1.8 million international students to 7.2 million by 2025, with Asia, especially China and India, accounting for 70 per cent of such rise (Bohm et al., 2002). According to the most recent statistics published by HESA (2018), China is the only country displaying a significant increase in student numbers in 2016/17 (14% growth since 2012/2013).

By 2016, the total number of Chinese students enrolled in UK HE was 91,215, keeping China in the top-most place in the list of sending countries (HESA, 2017). Until 2027, it is anticipated that 60 per cent of global growth in the number of international students can be credited to China and India (British Council, 2018).

The huge and incremental number of international students and their uneven distribution have attracted numerous researchers to look for underlying factors behind international students' individual choice of a destination country to study (Maringe and Carter, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Mazzarol et al., 2001; Oliveira and Soares, 2016). According to the survey conducted by the British Council from 2007 to 2013, the three most important factors are: career prospects; internationally recognised qualifications; and university reputation (Education Intelligence, 2014). All these are closely related to the quality of HE offered by the host university and the quality of international experience.

However, a most recent report, *International Student Mobility to 2027: Local investment, global outcomes*, forecasts that there will be a slowdown in the rate of growth of outbound students until 2027 (British Council, 2018). In the past, students chose to study abroad largely for a higher quality of education. However, many countries that are historically important exporters of international students, such as China, have seen increased development in their own HE offerings. This is believed to be the main reason behind the anticipated slowdown in international student mobility (British Council, 2018; THE, 2018).

Given that Chinese students are currently representing the largest cohort of international students studying in UK HE, and that HE in China has been developing noticeably, it seems to be more critical and sensible than ever before for the United Kingdom, a traditionally popular destination country, to work further on enhancing its HE quality and to explore a more efficient way of improving academic experience of Chinese students.

1.2 How to understand HE as a service?

In advance of discussing whehter HE could be categorised as a service, it is essential to understand the nature of a service in the first place (Lusch and Wu, 2012; Solomon et al., 1985). Many researchers have strived to elucidate what a service is, producing numerous and various definitions. Compared to commodities (e.g., wheat, and crucial oil) and manufactured 'goods' (e.g., furniture, cars, and cellphones), the intangible nature of a service is emphasised, either explicitly or implicitly, in a large part of existing service definitions. Lovelock and Wright (1995) describe a service in a simplistic way, as 'something that may be bought and sold but that cannot be dropped on your foot' (cited in Kumar, 2010, p.18). More formally, Lush and Wu (2012) defined a service as 'the process of doing something for another person (or entity) that is beneficial' (p.2).

Apart from this intangible nature, Parasuraman et al. (1985) added two more primary characteristics to services – inseparability and heterogeneity – which will be discussed in more detail in section 2.2.2.1. Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Giese and Cote (2000) maintain that the diversity in service definitions is attributable to the above three characteristics. In addition, there seems to be a general consensus among many researchers that these characteristics of a service make it different from traditional goods (Hill, 1995; Palmer, 2011; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Many countries, particularly developed countries including the UK, have seen industrial restructuring – a pronounced shift from the production of goods to the production of services (Nunn, 2001). Technological development in transport and in communications (e.g., cellphone, internet) has facilitated various ways of trade in services (Tilak, 2011; WTO, 2010). While it is usually not challenging to conceive a mental image when 'trade in goods' is mentioned, above characteristics of a service bring about great impediments to conceptualise and quantity 'trade in service' (Jensen, 2013; Knight, 2002). With a particular focus on eliminating barriers to trade in services, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) classified all internationally traded services into 12 broad sectors (e.g., Banking, Telecommunication, Recreation and Transport) and one of them is educational services (WTO, n.d.). According to GATS, trade in education between the member countries can be operated with four modes of supply:

- *Mode 1: Cross Border supply*, refers to the provision of a service across the border but customers or sellers do not need to physically move. Tilak (2011) suggests that service provision under this mode is analogous to normal trade in goods. Examples in education include distance education or virtual training programmes (e-learning).
- *Mode 2: Consumption Abroad*, refers to the provision of a service where customers' physical movement from one WTO member to another (i.e., the country of the supplier) is required. In the education context, this mode means the mobility of students travelling overseas to study.
- *Mode 3: Commercial Presence,* means that the service supplier of one member country provides the service by establishing commercial presence in another country. In education contexts, examples include opening educational institutions or branches overseas, and twinning partnerships between educational institutions of different countries.
- *Mode 4: Presence of Natural Persons*, requires natural persons to temporarily travel cross-border to provide the service overseas. In the context of education, these persons can be teachers or researchers going to another country. In other words, this mode also concerns with mobility of persons. However, it is different from Mode 2 as there is no mobility of students.

Nevertheless, the GATS (WTO, n.d.) is not very helpful in terms of providing explicit explanations about how education services are different from other services that it covers. It did not support the researcher of the current study in understanding, for example, how educational services are distinct from health services, despite that her review of the WTO website may be inexhaustive. However, this section only aims to show an awareness of the several complexities associated with education services covered by the GATS, rather than making a judgement on it. As Tilak (2011) put it, it should be warned that "the complexity, nuances, and implications of bring education under the GATS are immense and have as yet been little discussed and understood" (p.28).

Within education services, the GATS defined five main categories based on the United Nations Provisional Central Product Classification (CPC) (WTO, n.d.): primary education, secondary education, higher education, adult education and other education. Various categories are distinct from one another mainly due to instructions at different levels of study from primary to HE (WTO, 2010). The four modes listed above apply to all the five categories. More specifically, WTO (2010) further described the distinction the two sub-categories in the higher education category: post-secondary non-tertiary education and tertiary education. While the former emphasises a "labormarket relevant qualification", the latter involves "first stage tertiary leading to a university degree or equivalent; and second stage tertiary for advanced research qualifications, such as a doctoral degree" (ibid, p. 3). Given that the focus of this study is international students who left their home countries and are currently pursuing HE in UK universities, it is the 'higher education' category (or the 'tertiary education' subcategory if being accurate) under the Mode 2 that is particularly relevant to this study.

It is arguable that this classification system offered by the GATS does not consider enough the complex reality of today where the non-traditional forms of education delivery are facilitated by new technologies (Knight, 2003). The increasingly ambiguous division between public/private education leads to more complexity to understand contemporary education reality in reference to this classification (e.g., Barrett, 2015; Collins, 2007). According to WTO (n.d.), all services except those "supplied in the exercise of governmental authority" fall under the jurisdiction of the GATS agreement. But what is the meaning of 'exercise of governmental authority' in HE contexts where there is a growth in "public-private mix'' (Jiang, 2002, p.14)? The agreement explains that services provided on a 'non-commercial basis' and 'not in competition' with other service providers would not be treated as tradable services. The open-ended interpretation of 'non-commercial' and 'not in competition' has led to debate over the role of the government in providing various education services (e.g., Barrett, 2015; Williams, 2016).

For the current study, these phrases used by the GATS make it particularly difficult for the current researcher to understand whether HE in the UK could be taken as a tradable service. This is because UK is one noticeable example where HE institutions, instead of receiving unconditional direct public finding as they used to, are now treated as service providers or autonomous financial organizations under contract to the state and other customers of their services (e.g., Knight, 2002; 2003; Sahni and Kale, 2004; Varoglu, 2002):

> I very much hope that it will seek ways of actively encouraging institutions to increase their private earnings so that the state's share of institutions' funding falls and the incentive to respond to the needs of students and employers is increased (DES, 1988).

The costs of such change in the role of HE intuitions have been the gradual shift from the pursuit of public wellbeing to securing more incomes, which has given rise to a dramatic rise in student number and intensified competition between HE institutions for funding from both government and private sources (Williams, 2016; 2017). In addition to the more significant amount of private funding coming into the UK HE, the increased competition in the international market to attract international students adds another complexity to the 'tradability' (Jenson, 2013) of HE services. Overseas students have to pay for the full cost of their study in the UK and the situation becomes even more complex when the tuition fees for UK and EU students were introduced and increased.

All these raise an outstanding question: does it mean the HE sector is no longer 'non-commercial' or 'not in competition' and becomes tradable?

In summary, it seems that there are many puzzles about the GATS waiting for clearer definitions. For instance, it would be more helpful if the GATS could make more clarifications about 'commercial basis' or 'competition' (WTO, 2010), and provide contextualised examples in accordance with various education systems of different member countries. In spite of their economic benefits and increasing share in the international market, education services has remained one of the least committed sectors under the GATS (Collins, 2007; Knight, 2002; Sahni and Kale, 2004). In the particular case of HE, the treatment of the GATS has its limitations and is still under ongoing negotiations (Barrett, 2015). Clearly, the current researcher is not the only person who feel challenging to understand to what extent HE could be seen as a tradable service. Actually, this issue has been the heart of the debate over the risks and opportunities brought by the GATS agreement to the HE sector (or even to the whole education sector).

Once again, this study has no intention to join the debate and judge the GATS. Instead, it seeks to offer a balanced perspective by showing the downsides and advantages of taking HE as marketable commodity. Supporters often point out the benefits that more international trade in HE can bring, such as innovation in new education delivery systems (e.g., Knight, 2002; 2003), economic value (Jensen, 2013; Kim and Zhu, 2010; WTO, n.d.) and greater student success to high-quality education provided by developed countries (e.g., Tilak, 2011). On the other side, examples of critics are: the threat to the government role (e.g., Collins,2007) or public good (e.g., Altbach, 2002), and issues in terms of the establishment of quality assurance and accreditation systems that does not discriminate any counties (e.g., Amaral 2014), unequal status of developing countries in international trade in HE (e.g., Naidoo, 2007; Sahni and Kale, 2004), exacerbated inequities in student access to HE (e.g., Kapur, 2008), pressure that some countries might face due to being less committed to HE trade (e.g., Knight, 2002) and brain drain in less developed countries (e.g., Li, 2010).

Despite the polarized views on the GATS, there has been a strong trend in student mobility (Mode 2) and increasing importance of the 'trade' element in HE under the name of internationalization (Tilak, 2011). The immediate effect is that more emphasis than ever has been placed on the quality of student experience (Nicolescu, 2009; Woodall et al., 2014) and the triggered effects of student experience on student satisfaction (e.g., Voss et al., 2007). With a full awareness of the opportunities and risks associated with the GATS and its implications for HE, the current study aims to investigate student experience of internationals students who are studying in UK universities. This will be realized through applying service quality, a concept from the marketing research.

It is outside the scope of the current study to discuss whether HE *is* a tradeable service. However, it attempts to propose that HE *could* be categorised as a service with several unique idiosyncrasies. What should be noted is that the idiosyncrasies below are based on existing literature and are discussed to differentiate HE from professional service of other types (Gruber et al., 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). In other words, they are not to differentiate HE from other sub-categories of the education sector (i.e., primary education, secondary education, adult education and other education) as mentioned above, but to illustrate three principle distinctive feature of HE as a service in relation to other non-education services. The proposal of distinctive feature is tentative, given that there is no clarification in the GATS in terms of how education services are different from other services.

The first unique aspect of HE as a service is that students play an active and integral role in the educational process and in determining its quality. Many researchers argue that it is problematic if applying conventional marketing principles mechanically to HE by taking students as pure customers (discussed more in section 2.2.2.4). Student consumerism can easily arise from an over-emphasis on satisfying students' needs without adequately realising their contribution to the educational process and the quality of HE service and how many economic benefits they bring. Because of student consumerism, 'the goal of effective pedagogy' (p.99) of HE could clash with student disengagement (Delucchi and Korgen, 2002). Delucchi and Korgen surprisingly discovered that 42 per cent of their sample (approximately 9000 sociology-majored undergraduates from an American university) tended to treat the attainment of an academic qualification as an automatic result of their tuition payment to universities, and therefore felt less committed to a degree.

The active and integral role of students is first embodied in their influence on their own learning experiences and outcomes during the process of HE service. According to Rothschild and White (1995), HE is an example of services where the educational output partially depends on students as a source of input. Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) argue that outcome and process are two different dimensions of the quality of a service and that, for HE service, both dimensions (especially the latter) are determined by the level of students' participation. Different students participate in HE with different levels of 'productive resources' (Ng and Forbes, 2008), such as language proficiency and communication skills. For instance, Chinese international students who have a higher degree of English proficiency and communication skills might have more frequent and desirable interactions with their teachers, and in consequence have more satisfactory learning experiences in UK HE. Students who are determined to achieve a specific academic goal that they set themselves need an enormous amount of motivation and intellectual skill (Gruber et al., 2010). Moreover, students exert a great effect on their own satisfaction with their learning experience during the HE process and with the quality of the HE service (Woodall et al., 2014). Due to the 'emergent, unstructured, interactive and uncertain' nature of learning experiences (Ng and Forbes, 2008, p.10), students with different dispositions or different input will inevitably attain different levels of satisfaction. As Bitner et al. (1997) maintain, the desired process and outcome of HE cannot be achieved if students' active engagement is not recognised.

The active and integral role of students is also manifested in their influence on other students' learning experiences during the process of HE service (Rothschild and White, 1995). As discussed earlier, HE process involves a high degree of interpersonal interactions (e.g., Lovelock and Wirtz, 2003). Under these circumstances, student-to-student interactions account for a large proportion (Oldfield and Baron, 2000). Rowley (1997) point out that student satisfaction with HE quality and the success of learning experiences are likely to be significantly influenced by the quality of interactions between students. Furthermore, many researchers (e.g., Woodall et al., 2014) assert that student-to-student interactions can dramatically affect the recommendations that a student will make to his or her friends or to potential applicants. In summary, the influences of students on the quality of their interactions with peers and on other students demonstrate that they are an important input for HE service.

The second idiosyncrasy of the HE service lies in its pivotal position in students' life so that students have to make a great effort to attain their academic goal (Ahmad, 2015; Gruber et al., 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). Those efforts, to a large extent, depend on the above-mentioned 'productive resources' that students bring. Unlike other professional services providers, universities and other HE institutions require regular and different forms of assessment throughout students' learning experiences in HE (Ng and Forbes, 2008). In order to acquire or retain their student status, students are responsible for meeting the admission or assessment criteria set by universities. Otherwise, universities are in the position to 'exclude those who do not meet the admission criteria even though the prospective "customers" may be most willing and able to pay the fees involved' (Sirvanci, 1996, cited in Chong and Ahmed, 2015, p.160). In this case, the output of the HE service is closely related to the performance of students as a source of input, which provides additional support for the active and integral role of students discussed above. Ng and Forbes (2008) believe that a shared responsibility between students themselves and universities is beneficial in fostering positive learning experiences in HE.

Another idiosyncrasy of HE as a service is the complex nature of teacher–student relationships. In services involving high personal contact, the interactions between customers and employees delivering a service play a central role in service delivery and are usually evaluated by customers as part of the quality criteria (Lovelock, 1983; Oldfield and Baron, 2000). Academic staff, as one important group of HE participants, have a huge amount of interactions with students. Nevertheless, the teacher–student relationship in HE setting should be deemed differently, compared to the provider–customer relationship in commercial services, where 'the customer is king' applies (Sultan and Wong, 2014). The reason is that the teacher–student relationship needs to be interactive, reciprocal and dynamic, and its quality is the result of contributions from both parties with their respective values and contributions (Cadman, 2000; Lusch and Wu, 2012; Ng and Forbes, 2008).

However, influenced by different ideologies and driven by different motivations, the teacher and the student tend to have different understandings of what comprises high-quality learning/teaching experience (e.g. Bianchi, 2013; Cheng and Tam, 1997). As Soloman et al. (1985) assert, 'one cannot predict the quality of outcomes with knowledge of only one actor's behavior' (p.101). Thus, this research argues that understanding either the values from the student-side or those from the teacher-side cannot represent an effective and comprehensive approach to comprehending the quality of the HE service and the quality of the teacher–student relationship, and that understanding both would be a better strategy.

It is worth noting here that although this research focuses on academic staff and students, it by no means views the teacher as the only entity offering an education service to students. Conversely, it acknowledges that HE as an idiosyncratic service cannot be successfully provided without significant contributions from other entities, aside from teachers and students. Examples of those entities involved include administrators, support staff, the university leadership team, sponsors and policy-makers, and so on. Given the limited scope of a PhD study and the extra resources (i.e., more time needed for data collection, additional costs which may be incurred, and the more complex procedure of communicating with and attaining permissions from different gatekeepers (Creswell, 2014) that is required for engaging all parties above, the current study only involves academic staff and students as a preliminary to future research.

The last distinctiveness of HE service is its ultimate task to serve society as a whole, beyond educating students (Rowland, 2001). According to Barnett (1990) and O'Neill and Palmer (2004), HE undertakes these tasks not only to prepare students for their future by imparting knowledge to them or by fostering their ability to convert the acquired knowledge into practical skills, but also to facilitate personal enhancement. In a broader sense, it has to serve the improvement of societal well-being: cultivating the 'informed and responsible citizens… needed to support the public good or commonwealth' (Lusch and Wu, 2012, p.6); and functioning as 'a vehicle to achieve change, create new ideas and initiate new practices that move a country toward increasing prosperity' (Govender et al., 2014, p.466). In order to achieve these tasks, universities and other HE institutions are obliged to motivate students to take part actively in their own learning process; and to create positive learning experiences for, and more importantly, with them (Franz, 1998; Ng and Forbes, 2008; Sultan and Wong, 2014).

Together with the increasing significance of the trade element in the HE sector is the 'quietly persuasive introduction of trade concepts, language and policy into the education sector", and this is termed by Knight (2003) as "trade creep" (p.17). Knight further argues that language often represents the first sign of a shift and this is also the case for trade creep. Whether students or who can be considered as customers for HE services is open to debate (e.g., Angell et al., 2008; Hill, 1995), as discussed in more detail in section 2.2.2.4. Many previous researchers also tried to apply the concept of *branding* to HE contexts and suggest that HE institutions use it not to sell products or services, but to improve attraction and loyalty (Nicolescu, 2009). Compared to other non-education sectors, branding has different implications for HE, as a high reputation for an enterprise is usually connected with high sales, whereas prestigious HE intuitions tend to accept less students (Hemsley–Brown and Oplatka, 2006). There are also some researchers questioning that whether applying commercial branding to HE can lead to negative effects on the institutional integrity of universities (e.g., Temple, 2006; Waeraas and Solbakk, 2008).

Ng and Forbes (2008) proposed that on top of the 4Ps in the marketing mix (i.e., product, promotion, place and price), three extra Ps are particularly relevant to education services: *people* including academics, students, administrators and other professional staff; *physical evidence* including teaching and learning materials, facilities and so on; and *process* those to "facilitate applications, registration, exceptions, learning activities as well as social activities (p.9). These elements work together to provide the core service and the supplementary service of HE. The two authors explained that the core service of HE is reified in students' learning experience, whereas the supplementary service is a facilitator of the core service through student accommodation, campus facilitators, staff support and so on. Similarly, Nicolescu (2009) claims that *product* in HE contains two components: educational services as the main product and support services as the associated product. However, it is arguable that the definition of HE product offered by Ng and Forbes and Nicolescu is under the premise that students are the customers for HE services. This is problematic because potentially various stakeholders can be customers for HE services (Harvey and Green, 1993). More doubt can be casted if challenging further in terms of the appropriateness to apply the concept of customers to HE contexts (section 2.2.2.4).

Alternatively, the process/product model assumes that HE is a process producing graduates as products (Reavill, 1998). Analogous to production of goods, education is seen as a transformation process turning students (raw materials) into qualified graduates (products). The input of this process is students' potential capability, and the major source of supply are still secondary schools. In this model, potential employers are the customers of HE products.

Despite that the various attempt to make an analogy between economic/trade concepts and HE may be helpful in terms of facilitating our understanding of HE as a special service, the current study wants to warn that there are serious limitations in their applications to HE contexts, because the HE sector has its peculiarities and complexities that are quite different from the business sector (Reavill, 1998; Temple, 2006). Although service quality is used to investigate academic experience of international students, this study makes no attempt to make ono-to-one correspondence between their studies at UK universities and economic/trade terms.

1.3 Rationale for adopting a service perspective in this study

One main objective of this study is to examine the perceptions of Chinese international students and academic staff of UK universities about the quality of the HE offering. In order to do so, this research prudently borrowed the concept of service quality from the service literature, although an attempt similar to this might be challenged due to its potential to encourage student consumerism. Rather than applying the traditional consumer-service provider relationship to the HE content, the current research acknowledges: 1) students' own significant contributions to the HE process and outcomes. That is, they play an active and integral role in the construction of their own learning experiences, the development of a dyadic student–teacher relationship, and general HE quality; and 2) the vitality of students' and academics' collaborative contributions to the quality of HE. Thus, this research would like to argue that bringing a service perspective to the HE context could have at least two great advantages, as follows.

The first advantage is that adopting the concept of service quality assists various stakeholders of HE in understanding students' needs for a high-quality learning experiences. Given that students play an active role in the HE process, it is sensible to examine the quality of HE from their point of view and to explore the nature of their views. As the 'direct recipient' (Ahmad, 2015, p.492) and the 'primary target audience' (Joseph et al., 2005, p.67) of HE service, the student perspective of their own needs has been recognised by many researchers (e.g., Ahmad, 2015; Eberle et al., 2016; Hill, 1995; Rowley, 1997; Sreekumar and Mahapatra, 2011). However, Oldfield and Baron (2000) and Joseph et al. (2005) suggest that there is a tendency to examine the quality of HE from an organisational perspective through traditional routes such as student feedback questionnaires designed by institutions rather than students themselves. At the heart of the service orientation is understanding and meeting consumer needs, which is salutary for this research, seeking to study the quality of UK HE with the active engagement of Chinese international students.

The second rationale is that the service perspective offers an effective path to communicate with students and teachers about the other party's HE expectations and experiences (Ng and Forbes, 2008). It is because the service literature has attached much importance to the dyadic interactions between service delivers and customers (e.g., Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Soloman et al. 1985), and to the compatibility of the two groups' perceived service quality (e.g., Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Sandmaung and Khang, 2013). In the HE context, it should also be acknowledged that perceptions of all stakeholders deserve careful considerations for quality assessment (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996; Rowley, 1997; Sandmaung and Khang, 2013). Nevertheless, most related studies have paid attention to the views of a single group of stakeholders, and this is believed to be inadequate to present a holistic picture of quality (Lagrosen et al., 2004; Sandmaung and Khang, 2013). The concept of service quality provides an insightful perspective to this research: exploring and comparing the perceptions of the two key stakeholders: the student and the teacher, who are the most important contributors to the educational process – might display a picture of HE quality in a more comprehensive and informative way.

1.4 Delimitation of this research

1.4.1 Purpose statement

This research examines the perceptions of Chinese international students studying in UK HE and of academic staff working in UK Russell Group universities. Specifically, it addresses the following aspects:

- service quality of HE provided by UK host universities from the perspectives of the two groups of participants;
- Chinese international students' self-evaluations of their own intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom;
- the potential relationship between perceived service quality of HE provided by the UK host universities and Chinese students' self-evaluated intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom;
- the changing patterns, if any, of these perceptions with the two groups of participants, accumulating more experiences in UK HE over time;
- the underlying reasons for any identified changing patterns from the perspectives of the two groups of participants; and
- the two groups of participants' suggestions for how to improve service quality of the HE offered by their university and how to facilitate Chinese international students' intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom.

1.4.2 Research questions

In accordance with the research purpose, the research questions that this study determines to address are as follows. These questions were theory-driven, as they were inspired by the gaps identified in the existing literature on HE service quality (further discussed in section 2.2.3) and on intercultural adjustment (further discussed in section 2.3.5). Four central questions have acted as a guide to the research questions listed below. They are: *Are international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university different from their teachers' perceptions*?; *Do international students' and academics' perceptions of service quality of UK HE change over time?; Do international students' perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the UK change over time?* and *Is there any relationship between international students' perception of service quality of UK HE and their intercultural adjustment to the UK?*

This research is based on a convergent parallel design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Given the nature of the research questions below, quantitative and qualitative strands were designed to answer separate groups of research questions: the former for Research Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and

7 and the other for Research Questions 4, 5, 8 and 9. The two strands were carried out independently of the other so that they were 'complete in themselves' (Morse, 2003, p.199). The quantitative cross-sectional survey design was conducted to examine, compare and relate the perceptions of Chinese international students and academics who were learning/teaching at the Russell Group universities in the United Kingdom. It also investigated the effects of time on participants' perceptions. Concurrently, semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with a smaller group of survey respondents, to: 1) obtain more details regarding what makes a high service quality of HE and what affects intercultural adjustment; and 2) further explore how universities are expected to improve service quality and support intercultural adjustment. The analysis for each method was conducted independently. In Chapter 5 (Discussion chapter), the results of the interview data are contrasted with and complement the results of the survey data.

1. From the perspective of international students and academic staff at UK universities, what is service quality of the HE provided by the current university?
2. Are teachers' and international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university significantly different from one another?
3. What is the change pattern (if any) in international students' and teachers' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university after accumulating experience of participation in UK HE over time?
4. From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how can a high quality of HE service be provided by universities in the United Kingdom?
5. From the perspectives of its international students and academic staff, how can service quality of HE be improved at the university?
6. Is there any statistically significant relationship between international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by their university and their perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom?
7. What is the change pattern (if any) in international students' perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom, with accumulating experience of participation in UK HE over time?
8. From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how is intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom affected?
9. From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how can intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom be facilitated by universities in the United Kingdom?

1.4.3 Original contributions of this research

Investigations into the service quality of HE and intercultural adjustment to the host country are no longer rare in the literature. Conversely, the abundant theories and wide applications across contexts, as reviewed in Chapter 2, manifest that they are well-studied subjects. Although the current research is a drop in the ocean compared to the number of existing related studies, it still makes its own distinctive contributions that are summarised here in the first place and elaborated later in sections 2.2.3 and 2.3.5. Section 6.4 will reinforce and expound on the original contributions of this research.

One major contribution that differentiates the current research from the existing literature is the active engagement of both academic staff and students – the two most important participants in the learning and teaching process. Previous studies have tended to discuss the issue of HE quality or international students' experience from the perspectives of either international students or academics. There are relatively few studies focusing on the opinions of both parties. Even fewer studies have been dedicated to discovering any gaps between the perceptions of these two parties and where these gaps lie.

From the service perspective, Heskett (1987) argues that the performance of contact personnel and the interactions between personnel and customers are also important quality indicators. Similarly, in HE context, students are in constant contact with their teachers, and teacher–student interactions greatly influence the quality evaluation of both sides (LeBlanc and Nguyen, 1999). The perceptions of both students and teachers should be studied together and compared in order to pursue more integrated insights into HE quality (Kingston and Forland, 2008). Through engaging both Chinese students and academics, the current study could make a unique contribution by displaying the degree to which the two sides' perceptions of the same topic is consistent or inconsistent, locating the mutually-agreed areas, identifying and calculating the gaps (if any exists) and providing suggestions to bridge those gaps. More importantly, it challenges the assumption made by many previous researchers that Chinese students and academics of host universities share similar interpretations of what constitute quality UK HE and of what hinders/facilitates Chinese students' intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom. It would therefore raise the various HE stakeholders' awareness of the vitality of promoting mutual and transparent communications between Chinese students and academics of host universities.

Another major contribution made by this research is its innovative attempt to explore the dynamics of participants' perceptions of HE service quality. Most existing studies have examined individuals' evaluations of HE quality as if they are something fixed in the mind. The current research argues that these evaluations are dynamic. For example, the quantitative data might indicate that some participants have similar perceptions of HE service quality, but the underlying reasons for their perceptions are unlikely to be the same. Another example is that postgraduate and undergraduate Chinese students might think about service quality differently, even if they are evaluating the HE offering at the same UK university. A student or an academic may update his/her HE service quality perceptions with passing time.

This study displays a consciousness of the dynamic nature of participants' service quality evaluations in three different ways. First, in the quantitative analysis, the variances of participants' perceptions by their gender, level of study (for student-participants only) and the length of their HE experiences in the United Kingdom were examined. Theoretically, a longitudinal design is more suited to tracking how students'/academics' service quality perceptions change with time. Nevertheless, a research design as such requires resources that a PhD student could hardly access. This study therefore adopted a cross-sectional survey design for the quantitative design. Cross-sectional surveys can provide a 'snapshot' of a representative sample of the population at one point in time and they differ from longitudinal surveys which collect data at intervals of time (Cohen et al., 2007; 2011).

Second, this research includes a qualitative phase where individual interviews with a few survey participants were conducted to explore further the nature of their perceptions. This is different from most previous studies (especially on HE service quality), where a single method (dominantly quantitative methods, such as the survey) has been employed.

Third, the current research is distinct from most previous studies on similar topics because it tentatively explores the relationships between international students' perceptions of service quality and of intercultural adjustment. Many previous studies have found that international students' educational expectations can exert great influence on their intercultural adaptation (e.g., Gu et al., 2010; Zhou and Todman, 2008). Having paid particular attention to Chinese postgraduate students in the UK, Tian and Lowe (2009) maintained that participants' academic experience can only be fully understood when a wider context of students' lives in the UK is taken into account. Focusing on the largest national group of international students in UK HE (i.e., Chinese students), this study attempts to provide a more holistic picture of student participants' academic expectations and on-campus experiences by also considering their broader intercultural adjustment to the host culture. It is the first study to explore whether there exists a relationship between how student participants perceive the service quality of UK HE and their level of intercultural adjustment in the UK.

1.5 Terminology explanation

Several important terms appear frequently in this thesis, which necessitates a clear definition for each. Although originating from and developing in various fields, they are explained here under the particular conditions of this study.

- *Academic year* in this research is calculated according to the definition given by HE Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (n.d.). It starts on 1 August of each year and ends on 31 July of the next.
- *Chinese international students* in this study are those who are normal residents of China and Chinese passport holders but have travelled cross-border for the purpose of education.
- *HE*: in the context of the United Kingdom, 'HE courses are programmes leading to qualifications, or credits which can be counted toward qualifications, which are above the

standard of GCE A-levels or other Level 3 qualifications'. They include 'degree courses, postgraduate courses and sub-degree courses such as those leading to HNCs or HNDs' (HEFCE, n.d.).

- *International students* refers to those who pursue education in a country that is not their country of origin (OECD, 2013).
- *Sojourner* in this research can be understood by reference to Mizukami's (2007) work. He frames the term from the perspectives of both the process and outcome of residency. The residency process of a sojourner in the host country is temporary, in relation to settlers who become permanent residents. Also, sojourners are different from settlers due to the 'outcome of their return to homeland, sooner or later' (ibid., p.27). Nevertheless, those who are initially temporary residents but later end up with a permanent stay in the host country are separate from sojourners, and are categorised as consequent-settlers. In general, a sojourner in this study refers to 'a temporary resident who may not be on the way to becoming a permanent resident in terms of legal or citizenship criteria' (ibid., p.20). The sojourner includes a wide range of travellers, including 'students, trainees, technical assistants, tourists, businessmen, military personnel, missionaries, foreign service officers, professors and others' (Brein and David, 1971, p. 215).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The primary search for literature was carried out by the researcher, who identified two key terms from the proposed research questions: *service quality* and *intercultural adjustment*. She began by going to the university's main academic library and using the university's internet search engine, which allowed her to access academic resources in the library's collection. The search engine also provided access to external academic resources that the library had subscribed to. She studied articles and books after the primary search and felt that further refining the search criteria, by adding another key term, *international students,* would yield more targeted references in the literature. She then carefully and closely examined the studies in the literature that her search strategy generated.

For the linkage between HE quality and the concept *service quality*, the expectation-experience (E-E) gap is under particular attention. Conceptualised on the basis of the E-E gap, service quality has been applied to various contexts. In section 2.2, three models will be explored initially and then contrasted with each other because they are all, although in different ways, based on the comparison between people's expectations and experiences (i.e., the E-E gap). Afterwards, the key theories and studies underpinning service quality will be critically reviewed in order to show how the E-E gap serves as an indicator of HE quality in the existing literature.

In terms of the adjustment made by international students, the literature on *intercultural adjustment* will be probed. Existing theories about this concept will be categorised into three facets for the review in section 2.3: group/individual level; the problematic/beneficial nature; and the dynamic adjusting process.

2.2 'Mind the gap' in higher education quality

2.2.1 Three models based on the expectation-experience (E-E) gap

In this section, three models are reviewed in order to introduce two component concepts of service quality – people'*s expectation* and *experience* – and to demonstrate how the gap between them could make a difference. Although closely related to each other, these three models vary in their respective proposition on how and why to understand *expectation*, *experience* and the gap between them.

The expectancy value model by Eccles et al. (1983) is presented first. It emphasises the important role of people's expectations of themselves in influencing their decision to take on a forthcoming task and in their later performance throughout that task. The implicit assumption is that if a person has lower expectations of his or her own ability in relation to his or her anticipation about the difficulty of the task, there are always adverse impacts on the performance. In contrast with the expectancy value model, the second model – the expectancy violation model – underlines the discrepancy between an individual's expectations and the actual experience. Furthermore, it recognises that unmet expectations do not necessarily bring about negative effects. What follows is the expectation disconfirmation model, which also places great stress on the impact of the E-E comparison, similar to the expectancy violation model. Taking a step further, it sets up a closer link between the comparison and a particular outcome – people's satisfaction.

Expectancy value model

Extending from Atkinson's (1964) expectancy value model, Eccles and her colleagues (1983) developed the modern expectancy value theory, directly linking people's task choice, task persistence and academic performance to their expectations and subjective values. The study covered what people expect of themselves and what effects these expectations may have. In this model, the interpretation of *expectation* is individuals' personal evaluations of themselves, developed from the consideration of their previous attainment outcomes and the anticipation about the forthcoming task (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). More specifically, the researchers, in the context of children's mathematical achievement, put forward two expectation-related terms for this model: *expectancy for success* and *ability beliefs*. Defined as 'children's beliefs about how well they will do on upcoming tasks, either in the immediate or longer term future' (p.70), *expectancies for success* are a consequence of a set of factors, such as people's perceptions of task difficulty and self-evaluations of their own competence. It was postulated to have a direct effect on individuals' choice of academic activities (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). However, it is distinguished from children's personal *ability beliefs*, as the former focuses more on future and the latter on current competence. Moreover, the notion of *ability beliefs* is related to 'broad beliefs about competence in a given domain' (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002, p.119), but *expectancies for success* place significant weight on 'a specific upcoming task' (ibid., p.119).

Despite the theoretical distinctions, the research of Eccles et al. (1983) demonstrates that neither children nor teenagers, in reality, can tell the difference between these two concepts. They are actually closely related to each other and both are able to exert a great effect on students' perceptions and decisions on whether to take part in particular activities, how much effort to make and how much better their performance could be (Eccles and Harold, 1991). In a longitudinal study of longer than two years, involving students ranging from 5th to 12th grade, *expectancies for success* were found to be one of the most powerful predictors of mathematics grades, and provided even more accurate predictions of children's mathematic performance than their previous mathematics grade (Eccles and Wigfield, 1995).

However, modern expectancy value theory has been criticised because of its assumption that people's choices of and performance in activities directly result from a logical cognitive process – estimating future success by contrasting their self-perceived ability with perceived task difficulty (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). In this case, the theory assumes that it is an individual's perception of the reality, rather than the reality itself, that enormously influences their decision to engage with and their sequent performance in a certain activity. Fischhoff et al. (1982, cited in Eccles and Wigfield, 2002), oppose such assumptions with an argument that when people try to make decisions, they tend to be in favour of a simpler decision-making process. Therefore, the presumed rational cognitive process of comparing expectations of task difficulty with current personal ability, in fact, may not occur.

In addition to the argument of Fischhoff et al., what needs to be noticed is that Eccles and Wigfield pay little, if any, attention to whether or how students have changed their perceptions of themselves during the process of fulfilling the task. Although informing the current researcher of how students' expectation can be understood in an educational context, Eccles and Wigfield's work provides only limited information concerning teachers' perspective on their students' self-evaluations.

Given the idea that people's *expectations* play an important role in their decision-making process and task achievement, many researchers have investigated it in an intercultural context. The pervasive practice is learning of sojourners' pre-departure expectations to understand better what factors have motivated their decisions to travel cross-border and how these expectations affected a certain attainment outcome (e.g., intercultural adaptation, intercultural effectiveness or academic performance) (Martin et al., 1995).

Positive or fulfilled expectations will bring about positive effects (Black and Gregerson, 1990), whereas negative or unmet expectations will lead to more difficulties, especially for intercultural adjustment (Berry, 1997; Weissman and Furnham, 1987). Attempting to know how individuals' expectations about themselves can influence their task performance in an intercultural context, Hawes and Kealey (1981) conducted a study to investigate the intercultural adaptation and effectiveness of 250 Canadian technical assistance employees allocated to six developing countries. For those who were effective in transferring their skills to the local people of the host countries, the factor of optimistic pre-departure expectations was one of the most powerful indicators. The researchers claimed that these effective personnel usually held positive yet tangible expectations, so they tended to state, 'I know this won't be easy... but we intend to do the best we can, and we'll be OK' (Hawas and Kealey, p.253).

Similarly, in a longitudinal research involving 227 Canadian technical assistance advisors assigned to work in 20 developing countries, Kearly (1989) examined and predicted intercultural adaptation and effectiveness. All the participants were asked to complete two questionnaires: one before their departure and the other three to 12 months after their arrival in the destination country. The first questionnaire contained 21 predictors of pre-departure expectations, and the after-arrival questionnaire consisted of outcome measures relating to six aspects of intercultural adjustment, such as difficulty in adjusting, contact with the host culture and satisfaction about life in another culture. The results showed that participants who demonstrated less confidence in their pre-departure expectations experienced more difficulty in adapting to life abroad than their peers. Conversely, participants' positive or confident expectations about their own ability to cope with the possible difficulties in the course of adapting to a new culture were associated with a larger number of contacts with the host culture, more local friends and a better intercultural understanding.

When it comes to international students in particular, their decision on whether study overseas, which destination country to go and which host institution to study in are affected by a set of 'push' and 'pull' factors (Chen, 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). 'Push' factors are those operating 'within the source country and initiate a student's decision to undertake international study' (p.82), whereas 'pull' factors are those from 'a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students' (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002, p.82). Academic factors, such as a high quality of both education and academic staff at the host institution, usually function as the foremost 'pull' factors. Before making choices about studying abroad, potential international students have already built up different expectations about the quality of education that will be provided by the optional countries and the HE institutions in question, and tend to base their decisions on these expectations (Maringe and Carter, 2007).

Paying attention to international students' adjustment in foreign cultural, Searle and Ward (1990) proposed another expectation-related term, *expected difficulty,* pertaining to 'how much difficulty the students expected to experience before they left their home country' (p.454). The definition indicates that it shares some commonalities with *expectancy for success* in the expectancy value model. Nevertheless, Searle and Ward examined the term particularly in the context of the intercultural adjustment achieved by international students rather than by overseas assignees. Moreover, they differentiated two different kinds of intercultural adaptation in international students' transition from their home culture to an alien one: sociocultural and psychological adjustment. Specifically, sociocultural adjustment was defined as the 'ability to "fit in" and negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture', whereas psychological adjustment concerned 'feelings of well-being and satisfaction' (Searle and Ward, 1990, p. 450). The study included 105 international students in total (either from Malaysia or Singapore) residing in New Zealand. Both types of adjustments were tested in relation to several variables, including *expected difficulty*. Items in the scale for *expected difficulty* were as the same as those on the sociocultural adjustment scale, touching upon the essential skills needed to deal with everyday life in the host culture. Generally, the results suggested that the expected difficulty has a significant relationship only with actual social difficulty (sociocultural adjustment) during intercultural transitions. That is to say, international students' expectations of difficulty in living abroad were found to make a difference to their social-cultural adjustment to the host culture. Another important finding was that sociocultural and psychological adjustment are related but, notably, they are conceptually distinct.

What remains veiled in the above studies (and in most studies reviewed later) where international students were engaged, is the dynamics between their expectations of the quality of education provided by the destination country and their perceptions of adjustment in that country. Although the research of Searle and Ward (1990) is constructive in terms of how to understand intercultural adjustment, the two researchers tend to conceptualise the term outside the academic context. The argument is that, if the concept is tested among international students, the academic experience needs to be taken into account. Given that education quality is one of the main 'pull' reasons for international students' decision to study overseas, it appears reasonable to anticipate that their academic experiences in a new culture and their perceptions of intercultural adjustment are interwoven.

Besides the adjustment to the host country, some researchers treated academic performance as another attainment indicator of the effects of students' expectations. According to Eccles and Wigfield (1995), students' motivation to learn is subject to their competence beliefs (i.e. their expectancy for success). These beliefs are individual expectations of their own ability to fulfill a task successfully in the future (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). The research of Chen et al. (2012) supports that expectancy of success is the most powerful factor of K-12 students' motivation to learn physics. A main objective of Sun et al.'s (2013) research was to determine to what degree American and Chinese middle school students distinguish in terms of their respective expectations of academic performance in studying physics. The results indicated that American students, in comparison to their Chinese counterparts, were more confident about their future performance in physics learning, providing some evidence for hypotheses that cultural influence is a factor contributing to students' expectations. However, performance indicators were not involved in this research, which led to limited information on the performance of Chinese and American students in physics learning and on the relationship between differences in students' expectations and their academic performance.

Weissman and Furnham (1987) paid explicit attention to sojourners' experiences in a host country. Working with a group of Americans undertaking assignments abroad, the researchers used a pair of questionnaires to quantify the sojourners' expectations and mental health in advance of their leaving for London. After six months, some of the same cohort completed the same questionnaires to measure their experience of living and working in the United Kingdom and their mental health overseas. It had been hypothesised beforehand that a greater expectation-experience discrepancy would lead to poorer psychological adaptation (indicated by mental health). The findings suggested that most expectations held by participants, pre-departure, matched their real experience. However, the data failed to support the hypothesis, because only a markedly wide gap between their expected and real experience was found capable of influencing participants' mental condition in the United Kingdom.

In general, the above studies relating to the expectancy value model share a commonality: they concentrate on the effects of different types of expectations on a specific outcome, such as decision-making, intercultural adjustment or academic performance. However, they shed limited, if any, light on sojourners' real experience and the effects of E-E comparisons. This identified commonality represents one of the major differences between the expectancy value model and the second model – the expectation violation model. The expectancy value model tends to simplify the effects of unmet/negative expectations with an assumption that, if people's expectations are not matched by their later experiences or if there is a lack of confidence in expectations, there will be adverse results (Martin et al., 1995). Nevertheless, the next model – the expectancy violation model – suggests that a desirable outcome could also result from expectations that are not actually met by experiences; that is, people have more positive experiences than they expect. The second model displays a more dynamic relationship between expectations and experiences; hence, it can be taken as a more refined theory than the expectancy value model (Rogers and Ward, 1993).

Expectation violation model

Originating from the field of communication research, the expectation violation model is credited to Burgoon and Jones (1976). It proposes that individuals hold expectations of a preferred personal space, referring to 'an invisible, variable volume of space surrounding an individual which defined that individual's preferred distance from others' (Burgoon, 1978, p.130). Violations of such expectations will have consequences, either negative or positive, on communication outcomes such as comprehension, attitude and evaluation of interaction-initiator's credibility, and so on (ibid.). However, it differs from the expectancy value model because it does not associate unmet expectations merely with negative effects. Instead, personal space expectations might be violated in a good or a bad way, and desirable outcomes will occur if people perceive that their expectations are positively violated (Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon and Jones, 1976; Martin et al., 1995).

The more complex relationship between expectations and experiences put forward by the expectancy violation model is similar to the argument of Louis (1980). She maintains that it is over-simplistic to assume that employee satisfaction will always decrease due to unmet work-related expectations. She further points out that previous organisational research often referred to *unmet expectations* as 'the differences between initial expectations (or needs) and actual experiences on the job' (p.228), but actually it only means *undermet expectations* – 'experiencing *less* of something desirable than was anticipated' (Louis, 1980, p.228). Alternatively, she raised the concept of *surprise* to stand for the discrepancy between 'an individual's anticipations and subsequent experiences in the new setting' (p.237), arguing that surprise would result from either overmet or undermet expectations, and that whether it produces pleasant or unpleasant effects is subject to different situations. Supportively, Cochrane (1983, cited in Searle and Ward, 1990) discovered that West Indians and Asians with higher expectations, with less desirable experiences in reality (undermet high expectations), had more difficulty in adapting to life in the United Kingdom.

Under the framework of Louis's (1980) study, Black and Gregerson (1990) tested the relationship between expectations, satisfaction and intention to leave the overseas post among a group of American expatriates working in Japan. The two researchers embraced both Louis's (1980) argument about the expectancy violation theory by underscoring the importance of 'the nature of the expectation and the likelihood that positive or negative reactions would be associated with any of three states of expectations (undermet, met and overmet)' (Black and Gregerson, 1990, p.488). The findings of their study support the hypothesis that having more job discretion than expected was a pleasant surprise, and this overmet expectation led to a rise in expatriates' work satisfaction. Moreover, other kinds of overmet expectation, such as the situation that the general working environment in Japan was better than participants had expected, gave rise to more general satisfaction, which was identified as the most effective factor for preventing sojourners' early attrition.

In the intercultural context, the expectancy violation model has also been widely applied. Combining the expectancy value model with the expectancy violation model, Martin et al. (1995) put forward a modified model (Figure 2.1) to describe international students' adjustment to foreign cultures. *Expectations* were conceptualised as 'positive or negative judgements about future overseas experiences', including both 'prescriptive (about what should happen) and descriptive elements (what will happen)' (Martin et al., 1995, p.91). As shown in the model, sojourners, influenced by gender, prior experiences and the location of their sojourn, form positive or negative expectations before arriving in the destination country. Subsequently, these expectations are either fulfilled or violated by after-entry experiences. The met and positively violated expectations result in positive assessment of the sojourn, whereas negatively violated expectations generate negative assessment. Based on this model, the researchers surveyed 248 American students' pre-departure expectations of 13 aspects of life abroad and then compared them to participants' real experiences of living in another country. Similar to Weissman and Furnham's (1987) research, the results implied that, surprisingly, most participants felt that their expectations bad been positively violated or at least met by their real experiences. Those whose expectations had been positively violated have displayed relatively positive evaluations of their lives of studying abroad, supporting the proposed model. Martin et al. (1995) conclude that the relationship between intercultural adaptation and expectation is directional; that is, successful adaptation stems not merely from met expectations, because positively violated expectations could contribute to it too.

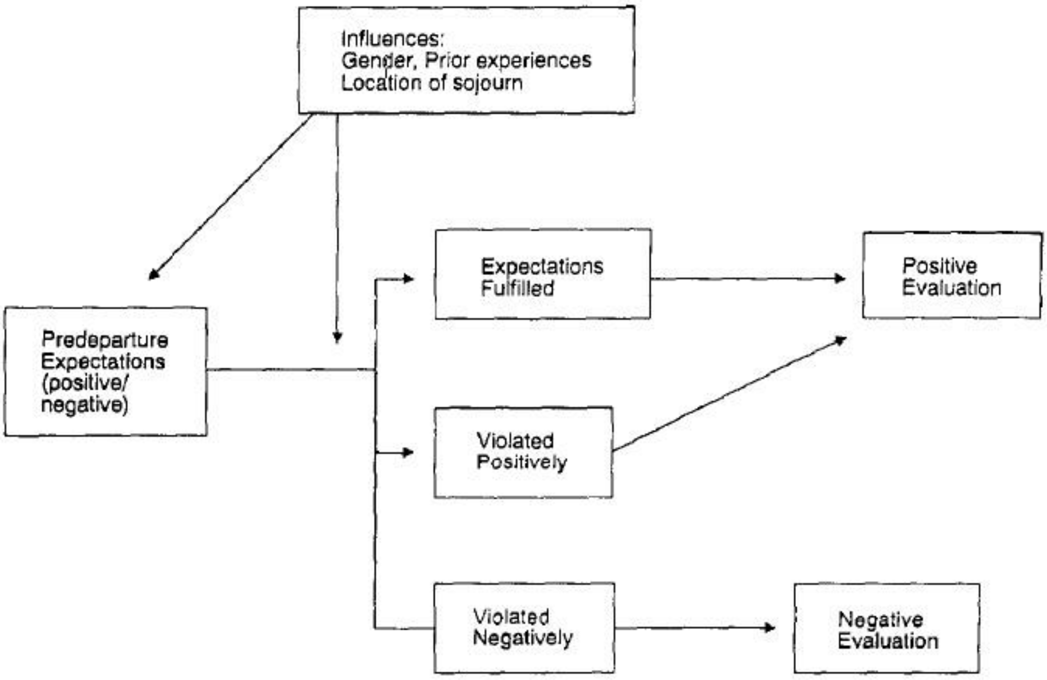


Figure 2.1: Modified expectancy violations framework of international students' expectations by Martin et al. (1995, p.92)

In addition to the relationship between the expectation-experience comparison and intercultural adaption, the application of expectancy violation theory extends to re-entry adaption to home country. Westwood et al. (1986) define *re-entry* as follows:

> Re-entry refers to the continuum of experience and behaviours which are encountered when an individual returns to a place of origin after having been immersed in another context for a period of time sufficient to cause some degree of mental and emotional adjustment prior to optimal functioning in the 'new' environment. (p.223)

As one of the most influential researchers interested in the phenomenon of re-entry, Adler (1981) emphasises the importance of giving equal or even more attention to returnees' re-entry experience. He explains that returning from the foreign culture and re-adjusting to the home culture could be harder than the reverse transition process. Usually with higher expectations of their career prospects in the home country, returnees easily suffer from enormous mental turbulence because their actual working experience in the home country is not as desirable as expected. However, people tend to assume that returning to a familiar place is easy. In a study involving 200 corporate and governmental employees returning to Canada after an average of two years abroad, working in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Adler (1981) supports this idea by quoting a participant's comments:

> Going home is a harder move. The foreign move has the excitement of being new... more confusing, but exciting. Re-entry is frightening... I'll be happy to be home... I really wonder if I can adjust back. There's some kind of traumatic reaction to it. It evidenced itself in my insomnia. There was something there... waking up at 4:00 am. (p.344)

Switching the focus from assignees working aboard to international students, Westwood et al. (1986) maintain that this population needs special attention, in that their stay in the host country is usually temporary. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963, p.40) suggest that international students, especially those who have not 'previously experienced a major geographic move, or more precisely a 'psychological relocation', possibly 'feel lost' when returning to their home country. This is because most of them have managed to adjust some of their existing thinking and behavioural patterns to the foreign culture during their transient stay. After returning, they find that many expectations formed before coming back fail to match their real experience at home (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963; Westwood et al., 1986).

The importance of paying attention to international students attracts subsequent researchers to apply the expectation violation model to investigate this particular cohort's re-entry adaptation. The importance of paying attention to international students attracts more subsequent researchers to apply the expectation violation model to investigate this particular cohort's re-entry adaptation. The study by Rogers and Ward (1993) explored 20 secondary school students' expectations, experiences and psychological adjustment, during their transition to the American culture as well as after their re-entry to New Zealand respectively. The two researchers conceptualised unrealistic expectations as those that were dramatically different from the real experience. Apart from the size, the direction of the E-E gap was also specified. For example, expecting more while experiencing less difficulty was taken as positive expectations, and vice versa. The results revealed that a greatly wider (unrealistic) E-E gap as a consequence of more social difficulties experienced than expected (negative expectations), as a whole, led to more psychological stress in the course of the re-entry process.

Expectation disconfirmation model

The third model – the expectation disconfirmation model – shares a few common characteristics with the expectation violation model. First, they both stress the importance of comparing people's expectations and actual experiences. Second, in relation to the expectancy value model, they both recognise that expectations unmet by experience are not responsible solely for unpleasant results. In other words, pleasant results may stem from unmet expectations. Third, both models provide a theoretic framework to researchers who thereby could link the E-E gap to a specific outcome.

Nevertheless, the two models are not identical: their differences lie in two areas: 1) while the expectation violation model originated in communication research, the expectation disconfirmation model has its roots in marketing research. Thus, this third model has a closer relationship with the concept of service quality, also from marketing research. It conceptualises the notion of experiences as individuals' perceptions of the performance of the product that they have purchased, rather than as what they have actually experienced, as understood in the expectation violation model; and 2) the expectation disconfirmation model specifically takes satisfaction as an outcome to which the E-E gap is related.

Expectation disconfirmation theory (EDT) was first proposed in the marketing literature by Oliver (1980) to describe customers' post-purchase satisfaction. The expectation disconfirmation model (Figure 2.2) contains four main concepts: *expectations*; *perceived performance*; *disconfirmation*; and *satisfaction*. Specifically, Oliver (1981, p.27) conceptualises *satisfaction* as 'the summary psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with the consumer's prior feelings about the consumption experience'. It is presumably determined by both the magnitude and the direction of *disconfirmation,* defined as the discrepancy between customers' predictions of the product performance prior to purchase (*expectation*) and their perceptions of the actual product performance after purchase (*perceived performance*) (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982). Oliver (1981) also highlights that pre-purchase expectations, however formed, serve as 'an adaptation level', similar to a 'baseline or standard against which subsequent performance is judged' (p.28) by customers. Any deviations from this adaption level will result in disconfirmation. Disconfirmation could be either *positive* when product performance is perceived to exceed expectations, or *zero* when perceived product performance is as good as expected. Both cases give rise to customer satisfaction. By contrast, disconfirmation would be *negative* if customers think that the performance of the product falls below their expectations, thus there will be dissatisfaction. The greater the size of the positive disconfirmation, the more satisfied are the customers. In this sense, satisfaction can be seen as 'an additive combination of the expectation level and the resulting disconfirmation' (Oliver, 1980, p.461).

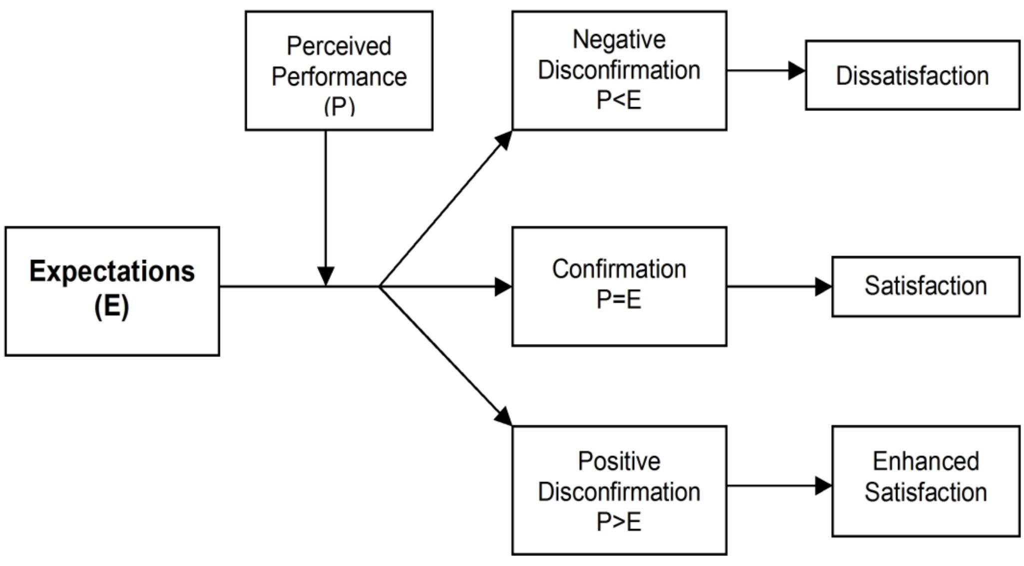


Figure 2.2：Expectation Disconfirmation Model by Bordia et al. (2006, p.04.4)

Two main methods have been widely employed to put the expectation disconfirmation model into operation, namely an *inferred approach* (or *subtractive approach*) and a *direct method* (or the *subjective approach*) (Yuksel and Rimmington, 1998). According to Yuksel and Rimmington (1998), *the inferred approach* requires a researcher to collect two sets of data: concerning customers' service expectations before purchase and concerning the actual performance that they believe they have experienced thereafter, respectively. Results of the separate data then will be subtracted in order to obtain a new kind of information, the disconfirmation score, which is of great importance to the succeeding analysis. On the other hand, *the direct technique* means that the researcher does not need to calculate the gap between the expectations and the perceived experiences, as the participants will be asked to report directly 'the extent to which the service experience exceeded, met or fell short of expectations' (Yuksel and Rimmington, 1998, p.61). One example of measurement is 'a Likert-type scale of "better than expected" or "worse than expected"' (ibid., p.61). Churchill and Surprenant (1982) indicate that the direct approach involves a psychological comparative process during which respondents subjectively evaluate the product performance in relation to their expectations. Likewise, Oliver (1980, p.460) suggests that 'expectations are a factor in post-purchase evaluations' because expectation disconfirmation is 'a distinct cognitive state resulting from the comparison process and preceding a satisfaction judgment'.

In this research, service quality is measured on the basis of the inferred approach. It could be argued that separate measurements of expectations and experience offer additional information that is valuable for a deep understanding of Chinese students' higher education experience in the UK. For example, student-participants with various expectations of their academic experience in UK higher education may end up with the same service quality score. If using the direct approach, however, this research is unable to reveal any nuances in those students' expectations.

In addition to marketing research, the expectation disconfirmation model has been extensively applied to and empirically supported in many other fields, such as in an intercultural context. Research into its effects on international students' satisfaction is an example, due to the increasing tendency to treat student satisfaction as an essential factor of educational quality evaluation (Cheng, 1990). Trying to provide theoretical support for connecting expectation disconfirmation with students' evaluation of educational quality, Cheng and Tam (1997) introduced seven models on school effectiveness from the literature to understandings of quality in the educational context. The Satisfaction Model, most widely used among the seven, assumes quality in education to be a 'relative concept' influenced by 'the extent to which the performance of an education institution can satisfy the needs and expectations of its powerful constituencies' (p.26).

Arambewela and Hall (2009) studied the expectations, perceptions of university performance and satisfaction of 573 international postgraduate business students from Asian countries (China, India, Indonesia and Thailand). All participants were studying at five universities in Australia when the research was conducted. By means of questionnaires, the study showed that students' satisfaction was predicted by their expectations and perceptions of university performance in terms of seven latent variables, including education, social orientation, economic considerations, safety, image and prestige, technology and accommodation. Exemplary measures of the variable *education* concerned 'valuable feedback from lecturers, good access to lecturers and high standard of teaching with quality lecturer' (p.562). Although there was an expectation-perceived performance gap in all the seven variables affecting student satisfaction, there was some variation in those gaps for students from different cultural origins. For instance, Indian students held the highest expectations for almost every factor yet had the lowest perception of the actual corresponding performance, which led to the most dissatisfied feelings being experienced by this group. By contrast, Chinese students had the lowest expectations of all the participants yet scored the perceived performance of each variable higher than the Indian students. Consequently, they indicated more satisfaction than their Indian peers. These findings are in line with the statement of Churchill and Surprenant (1982), that low expectations and/or high product performance tend to generate positive disconfirmations and thus satisfactory feelings, while high expectations and/or low product performance are presumably linked to unpleasant disconfirmations and dissatisfaction.

In the studies reviewed above, there seems to be a preference toward using questionnaires to measure expectations and experiences. This motivated Hellsten (2002) to conduct a qualitative study, making use of interviews with a small sample of international students who were in the course of transition to the Australian learning environment. The researcher found that one common expectation among all the interviewees before undertaking their overseas study was their cultural and social integration into the Australian culture. This is because international students tended to believe that integrating into the host culture would facilitate their academic attainment, which was deemed to be helpful to their career prospects. Interestingly, participants actually evaluated their later experiences only in relation to what they had personally invested, rather than to their earlier expectations of cultural integration. Under some circumstances, the substantial amount of personal or material investment negatively affected international students' perceptions of their actual experiences. The researcher suggests that comparisons between expectations and perceived experiences by international students themselves are 'subjective and may therefore not hold relevance to the factual educational provisions' (Hellsten, 2002, p.10).

Similarly conducting interviews, Bordia et al. (2006) applied the expectation disconfirmation paradigm to the investigation of international students' English as Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Despite an acknowledgement that there are differences between customers and international students, the researchers emphasise two characteristics shared by these two cohorts. In the first place, ESL or EFL students, like customers, have to invest a huge amount of money in accessing the courses. Although driven by various objectives and expectations, they endeavour to improve their English proficiency, which makes them more akin to consumers deciding to buy certain products to satisfy their similar needs. The second similarity is that students form expectations based on previous learning experiences, desirable outcomes and future needs before undertaking the language courses. Then they tend to assess the courses with respect to what they have expected beforehand, which is similar to what customers normally do after purchase, as described by Oliver (1981).

The interviews with students and teachers revealed that both sides attributed a negative disconfirmation of expectations to 'psychological and behavioural changes, performance decrement and lack of attendance and re-enrolment' (Bordia et al., 2006, p.04.11). Participating students claimed that they would be more confident, motivated and keen to attend lectures, and would also be more likely to recommend the course to prospective students if their actual learning experiences lived up to their expectations. Therefore, it seemed that disconfirmation of expectations of ESL or EFL students impacted not only on their satisfaction with the course but also on their learning motivation, performance and class behaviour. Agreeing with students' opinions, the teacher stated that 'positive disconfirmation had an encouraging effect' on learning outcomes (p.04.12); they added 'enhancing positive attitudes toward academic staff and the host culture' as another desirable outcome of positive expectation disconfirmation.

The studies reviewed so far reveal two limitations, which are enlightening for this study: 1) they have investigated the expectations, experience and the E-E gaps based on either the dominant usage of questionnaires or conducting interviews. Few studies have combined these two methods; 2) Even though the importance of understanding international students' expectations and experiences are recognised, few studies have focused on Chinese students. The studies of Arambewela and Hall (2009), Hellsten (2002) and Bordia et al. (2006) have treated international students as if they form a homogeneous group. This research argues that some Chinese students' perceptions of the service quality of UK higher education are highly likely to be different from those of international students with other cultural origins.

In spite of wide application, the expectation disconfirmation model remains subject to criticism. Most criticism is centred on using expectations as the baseline to which perceived experiences are to be compared (Yuksel and Yuksel, 2008). The first reason for criticism is the underlying assumption of the model; that is, that people have to be clear beforehand about what they expect, which, in many cases, is not feasible. Yuksel and Rimmington (1998, p.62) argue that 'lack of experience with a service or lack of familiarity with a destination may cause expectations to be tentative and uncertain'. For example, people may expect that travel in Eastern and Western Europe is similar, as the countries are close together. Likewise, prospective international students with little or no experience of living or studying in the host country may have difficulty in forming clear expectations about their forthcoming overseas life, and may even suppose that the learning and teaching environment in another culture will not be greatly different from that in their home country. By contrast, students who already have some learning experience in the destination country are more likely to form expectations that are accurate about the actual academic environment that they will experience in future, and thus will be more satisfied with their overseas study. In this case, taking expectations as the standard to evaluate international students' real experiences and satisfaction is problematic.

Second, the changing nature of expectations makes the expectation disconfirmation model questionable. Rather than staying fixed over time, preconceived expectations are likely to be affected by people's later experiences in that 'if expectations are measured after or even simultaneously with the service experience, those expectations have been biased by the experience' (Yuksel and Rimmington, 1998, p.62). This further demonstrates how unreliable it may be simply to assume that people use their pre-formed expectations as a baseline to evaluate their later experiences and to generate a satisfaction level. Moreover, the changing nature of expectations leads to difficulties in choosing an appropriate time at which to measure them accurately. For instance, it has been commonly observed in hospitality research that clients actually keep modifying their pre-formed expectations based on their interactions with hospitality staff, and tend to evaluate their experiences relative to their altered expectations. This timing issue also brings challenges to the predominant usage of the cross-sectional questionnaire design adopted by a large number of the studies reviewed.

The changing nature of people's pre-developed expectations strengthens the value of the current study, one aim of which is to capture the dynamics in Chinese students' and academic staff's perceptions. Barnes (2007) suggests that the gaps in Chinese postgraduates' perceptions of the quality of higher education could be because of their lack of experience and knowledge of UK HE and life in general. Nevertheless, this study argues that many Chinese students who have little previous academic or intercultural experience in the UK probably change and develop their expectations of UK HE after they have actually studied in the UK for a period of time. It would be overly simplistic to investigate Chinese students' perspectives of service quality based on the assumption that their expectations do not develop.

In summary, section 2.2.1 presents three models of people's expectations and experiences to pave the way for the introduction of service quality in section 2.2.2. Each of these models differs from the other in many aspects (summarised in Table 2.1).

First, each model has a distinctive interpretation of individuals' expectations. To be more specific, 'expectation' in the first model refers to people's expectancy for success – the belief in their own ability to fulfill a specific task in future. By contrast, the second and third models understand the term as individuals' anticipations or predictions about the future before they take a certain action, such as travelling abroad, making a purchase or returning to their home country.

Second, the models lay different degrees of emphasis on people's actual experiences and on the E-E gap. The expectancy value model focuses on the comparison between an individual's expectations of their ability and the difficulty of upcoming tasks. However, the other two models stress the comparison between what people expect and what they really experience. The effects of the E-E gap are also a focal point for the last two models. Nevertheless, the conceptualisation of *experience* in the second and third model differentiates them from each other. While the expectation violation model concerns what people think they have actually experienced after a certain action, the expectation disconfirmation model highlights their perception of the performance of what is to be evaluated as the indicator of their experience.

Third, different outcome indicators are used in these three models. Although both pay attention to the impacts of the E-E gap, the expectation disconfirmation model makes an explicit connection between E-E gap and satisfaction, whereas the expectation violation model does not. With regard to the expectancy value model, it associates individuals' expectations of their own ability with the decision-making process or other outcome indicators (e.g., intercultural adjustment task endurance or task performance).

However, all three models share some similarities with *service quality*, to be discussed shortly. One similarity is the emphasis, although in various degrees, on the effect of people's expectations, experiences and the E-E gap on a certain outcome variable. Another is that both the three models and service quality have been widely applied to the intercultural context by examining the perceptions of sojourners.

Table 2.1: Summary of the four models related to the E-E gap

Model	Interpretation of expectation	Interpretation of experience	Emphasis on the E-E comparison	Popular indicator as an outcome
Expectancy value model	*Expectancy for success* (an individual's confidence/belief in his ability in relation to his anticipated difficulty of a given future task) (Eccles et al., 1983)	less and implicit emphasis on comparing people's experiences	✗	decision-making (e.g., about taking on a task, accepting an overseas assignment, studying abroad, choosing a host country/university), motivation, task/academic performance, intercultural adjustment, etc. unmet expectation/negative confidence always leads to negative outcome
Expectation violation model	'Positive or negative judgement about future overseas experiences' (Martin et al., 1995, p.91)	what people have actually experienced	✓	people's evaluation (e.g., work satisfaction, early attribution from overseas assignment, international students' assessment of their learning and living experiences abroad; intercultural adjustment; adjustment after re-entry to the home country), etc. expectation violation may lead to positive outcome
Expectation disconfirmation model	customers' predictions about the product performance prior to their purchase of that product (Oliver, 1980); What customers think *would* be provided by the service provider (Parasuraman et al. 1988)	people' s *perceived performance* of the product after their purchase (Oliver, 1980)	✓	satisfaction in particular; academic performance; willingness to give recommendations; motivation, etc. expectation disconfirmation may lead to satisfaction
Service quality	'desire or wants of customers' (Parasuraman et al. 1988, p.17); That is, what customers think *should* be provided by the service provider (ibid.)	people's perceived performance of the service delivered (Parasuraman et al. 1988)	✓	perceived service quality satisfaction

2.2.2 Service quality: basing HE quality on the E-E gap

So far, this chapter has included a review of three models of *expectation* and *experience*, and has provided some insights into how discrepancies between the two concepts can play a part in the HE context, such as in student satisfaction, second language-learning performance or adjustment to a foreign culture. In this section, *service quality* will be the main focus. It is explained in the first place mainly through comparisons with the expectation disconfirmation model. Meanwhile, the well-known measuring instrument of service quality, SERVQUAL, is introduced, and how it has been widely applied and variously adapted in different settings is presented. What follows is a display of how service quality has been extended by a number of researchers. However, there is a debate about service quality and SERVQUAL. In the last part of this section, service quality is further discussed under the setting particularly related to the current research: the HE and intercultural contexts.

2.2.2.1 Introduction to service quality and its measurement

Parasuraman et al. (1985) are credited with introducing the construct of *service quality* proposed for marketing research to measure the quality of a provided service. It is defined as 'the discrepancy between consumers' perceptions of services offered by a particular firm and their expectations about firms offering such services' (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p.14). Service quality is assumed to be measurable, but only from the perspective of consumers. As a result, this construct involves *perceived quality*, which is 'the consumer's judgement about an entity's overall excellence or superiority' (Zeithaml, 1987, cited in Parasuraman et al., 1988, p.15).

Different from *objective quality*, which may be measured objectively, service quality suffers from the difficulty of being accurately evaluated due to its three distinctive characteristics: *intangibility, heterogeneity* and *inseparability*. Specifically, most services are intangible, so they cannot be 'counted, measured, inventoried, tested, and verified in advance of sale to assure quality' (Parasuraman et al., 1985, p.42). As argued in section 1.2, intangibility also applies to the context of HE, as it is hard for host universities and academic staff to anticipate precisely how international students view the education that has been offered and how they would evaluate its quality.

Heterogeneity relates to the variation in services. In the educational context, the variation might lie in education providers – in the HE offer by different universities in the same country, different teachers within a single university or even the same teacher in different classes. Also, it might lie in education receivers, such as international students whose perceptions of HE quality inevitably vary from person to person and from day to day.

The third main characteristic of service quality is associated with how inseparable are the production and consumption of many services. Parasuraman et al. (1985) maintain that the increasing intensity of customer participation makes companies' attempts at service control harder, due to the effect of customers' incremental input to the service delivery process. Examples of counterproductive student input are also ubiquitous in the context of HE. For instance, students may: attend lectures without reading the required material beforehand; fail to concentrate on the lecture; or feel reluctant to take part in group discussions. International students, as a particular group of education receivers, are also able to exert their unique influence on the quality of education provided by the host university, for example through constant communication with their teachers. Whether their communicating experience is desirable or not depends not only on the teachers but also on the students themselves, such as their personality, wiliness to communicate and communication skills. The contributing factors of teacher–student communications vary from person to person for students and teachers, which, in turn, demonstrates the *heterogeneity* of service quality (Hill, 1995).

Service quality differs from the expectation disconfirmation model, with the focus of the former on *perceived service quality* as an outcome of the expectation-perceived performance gap while the focus of the latter on *satisfaction*. When defining *satisfaction*, Oliver (1981) related it to the 'surprise inherent in a product acquisition and/or consumption experience' (p.27) and further emphasised that satisfaction is associated with a particular transaction and therefore is more situation oriented. In this sense, *satisfaction* is distinguished from *attitude*, which is 'the consumers' relatively enduring affective orientation for a product, store or process (e.g., customer service)' (Oliver, 1981, p.42). Similar to the difference between satisfaction and attitude, the distinction between *perceived service quality* and *satisfaction* is that, while satisfaction is transaction-specific, perceived service quality could be deemed a form of attitude – a global evaluation regarding pre-purchase expectations, in contrast to the delivered performance of service in the eyes of consumers.

The directional relationship between satisfaction and perceived service quality remains unsettled, given the disparate viewpoints in the literature. Parasuraman et al. (1988) argue that the two constructs are closely connected, but it is 'incidents of satisfaction overtime' (p.16) that lead to perceived service quality. However, there are also conflicting findings. For instance, in the study by Carrillat et al. (2009), perceived service quality was taken as an antecedent of consumer satisfaction, on which it exerts positive effects. In the Service Encounter Evaluation model of Bitner (1990), the level of customer satisfaction, at the outset, was postulated to result from a disconfirmation between their perceived service performance and service expectations (i.e., perceived service quality). Nevertheless, a causal path from satisfaction to perceived service quality turned out to be statistically supported. After comparisons in two different settings (facility/equipment-based and people-based industries), Lee et al. (2000) drew a different conclusion, that customer satisfaction was actually a result of service quality and that the former exerts more effect on a customer's purchase intention than the latter.

Apart from the focus on *perceived service quality*, the conceptualisation of service quality also contains the construct of *expectation*. Likewise, the term *expectation* is differentiated from its counterpart involved in the expectation disconfirmation model. According to Oliver (1981, p.33), in the expectation disconfirmation model expectations mean 'consumer-defined probabilities of the occurrence of positive or negative events if the consumer engages in some behaviour'. In other words, expectations are related to consumers' predictions for an impending purchase in terms of what *would* be offered, locating in a probability continuum ranging from 'certain not to occur' to 'certain to occur' (ibid., p.33). Miller (1977, cited in Zeithaml et al. 1993, p.2), regards this interpretation as *expected standard or predictive expectation*, 'an objective calculation of probability of performance'. Nevertheless, Parasuraman et al. (1988) point out that, for service quality, expectations should be regarded as 'desires or wants of consumers' (p.17), which leans toward what customers think *should* be offered by the service provider, not what *would* be provided. Similarly, Zeithaml et al. (1993) conceptualise expectations as an *ideal standard* or *normative expectation,* which provides customers with a relatively stable norm for service quality evaluation. In order to explain how expectations are formed, Zeithaml et al. (1990, cited in Hill, 1995, p. 12) propose five influential sources:

- *Word of mouth communication* (what consumers hear from other consumers);
- *Personal needs* (determined by individual characteristics and circumstances);
- *Past experience of the service* (or a related service);
- *External communications from the service provider* (for example, printed advertisements, TV commercials, brochures and oral promises from service provider employees);
- *Price.*

Despite differences (as discussed above) between the component concepts, the underlying assumption of service quality is based on the expectation disconfirmation model, as it also assumes that quality is 'a function of the magnitude and the direction of the gap between expected service and perceived service' (Parasuraman et al., 1985, p. 46). In other words, service quality equals the expectations of a service minus the perceived performance of that service. The service expectations can be confirmed, or positively or negatively disconfirmed, by how consumers perceive the actual service performance. A negative disconfirmation indicates that the service quality delivered is not adequate, as expected.

Ever since the 1980s, the importance of service quality has been promoted and widely acknowledged, especially in terms of its contribution to prompting market sharing, improving investment return and lowering production costs (Hampton, 1993). A great many researchers, therefore, have strived to design a tool with the aim of measuring it, which stimulated the production of an influential instrument – the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Scale of Parasuraman et al. (1988).

The original version of SERVQUAL consisted of 97 items, representing 10 dimensions. Later, Parasuraman et al. (1988) refined it into a five-dimensional instrument containing only 22 items. Each dimension was designed to measure customers' perceptions of a certain aspect of service quality. The five identified dimensions are:

- ***Tangibles:*** Physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel
- ***Reliability****:* Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately
- ***Responsiveness***: Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service
- ***Assurance***: Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence
- ***Empathy***: Caring, individualised attention that the firm provides its customers

(Parasuraman et al., 1988, p.23)

With regard to each dimension, two separate scores are obtained, similar to the inferred approach discussed in the previous section. One is about the respondents' *expectations* of what service *should* be provided, and the other relates to their *perceptions* of the performance of delivered service. Then, the discrepancy of the two scores is calculated to quantify the *perceived service quality*. Parasuraman et al. (1985) identify five types of gaps from the executive and further postulate that the magnitude and direction of the Gap 5 may be viewed as a result of the other four:

- *Gap 1*: the discrepancy between consumer expectation and management perception about what a consumer expects in quality service.
- *Gap 2:* the discrepancy between management perception concerning consumers' expectations and the company's service quality specification that is actually established.
- *Gap 3:* the discrepancy between the established service quality specifications and the actual service delivery.
- *Gap 4:* the discrepancy between the actual service delivery and external communication of the company about the service.
- *Gap 5:* the discrepancy between the expected and perceived service from the consumer's point of view.

Parasuraman et al.'s emphasis on understanding the size and direction of Gap 5 from the customers' perspective has realistic significance for HE contexts. It implies the importance of investigating HE service quality from the perspectives of students, who are usually regarded as customers of HE. However, it has been argued in section 1.2 that HE should not be viewed as a traditional service and that the learning and teaching process requires active engagement by various HE stakeholders. Thus, in the HE context, an investigation of Gap 5 needs to be extended from the customers' point of view to that of various HE stakeholders (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016). This study pays specific attention to the perceptions of students and academics of Gap 5, as it believes that they are the two most important and relevant parities in the learning and teaching process.

2.2.2.2 Extensions of service quality

Ever since its emergence, many subsequent researchers have been committed to extending the original conceptualisation of service quality. The five-gap model by Parasuraman et al. (1985) was further enriched by Luk and Layton (2002), casting doubts on whether managers and front-line service providers share similar understandings about what customers expect in service quality. They stressed that 'service providers holding different perceptions of customer expectations may render the service in a way deviated from the specification defined by the manager' (p.111). Therefore, two extra gaps were added:

- *Gap 6*: the discrepancy between the understandings of customer expectations by manager and front-line service providers
- *Gap 7*: the discrepancy between customer expectations and front-line service providers' perceptions of such expectations.

Also expanding the scope of service quality, Gronroos (1984) developed a Service Quality Model (Figure 2.3) in which *perceived service quality* is defined as a function of 'putting the *perceived service* against the *expected service*' (p.37). Additionally, quality was further divided into two different categories: *technical quality,* pertaining to 'mere technical outcome of the production process' (p.38) – *what* consumers have been given by the service; and *functional quality,* referring to 'the way in which the technical quality is transferred to him functionally' (p.39) – *how* the service is delivered. For example, in the educational context, the number of classes that students attend could be seen as the technical quality of educational service, while the teaching style that the tutors use to deliver their lectures falls into the category of functional quality.

Gronroos (1984) argues that both kinds of quality have a great influence on consumers' views of the service received. Technical quality alone is not enough to achieve a high level of service quality, in spite of its acknowledged importance, and functional quality is likely to be more important. However, the assessment of functional quality relies more upon people's perceptions, making it less objective than technical quality. A combination of the effects of both technical and functional quality develops another dimension of service quality: *corporate image*. According to Gronroos, *corporate image* is 'the result of how the customer perceives the firm' (p.39) and it especially influences people's pre-purchase expectations. Customers are inclined to expect a high level of service from companies with a good image. If their perceived service falls short, the gap between expected service and perceived service will increase, which may invite conflict.

The model is enlightening in the sense that it highlights the importance of considering both the outcomes and process of a service when appraising its quality, although only a few studies, especially longitudinal research, have been carried out to support it empirically (Clewes, 2003). In the HE context, this model reminds us that individuals' perceptions of service quality should not be regarded as only an outcome, as in most previous studies. It should be noted that these perceptions are dynamic and develop during the HE process. This research argues that it is essential to examine closely the dynamics of service quality perceptions.

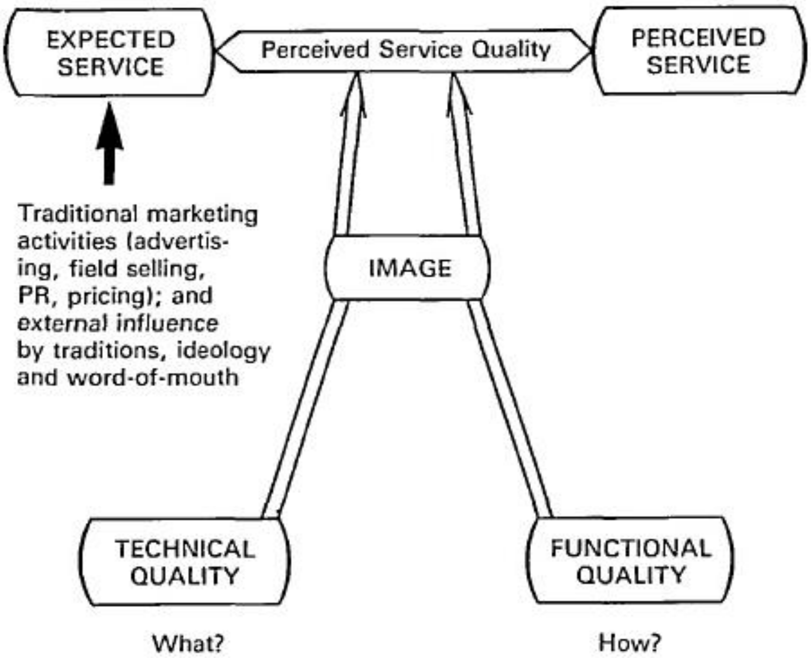


Figure 2.3: Service quality model by Gronroos (1984, p.40)

Brown and Swartz (1989) focus particularly on professional service quality and lay great emphasis on the importance of service providers' perceptions. They explain that providers of professional service possess a unique feature: 'professionals typically have advanced degrees, meet credentialing requirements, and often hold equity positions in their organizations' (p.93). In order to explore and assess the quality of this special type of service, the two researchers tried to identify inconsistencies in people's expectations and experiences in the context of a medical setting. Perceptions from both physicians and patients were probed through an identical questionnaire concerning the relationship that a patient has with their physician and with other supporting staff. Three kinds of gaps were hypothesised in advance:

- *Gap 1*: the inconsistency between client expectations and client experiences
- *Gap 2*: the inconsistency between client expectations and professional perceptions of client expectations
- *Gap 3:* the inconsistency between client experience and professional perceptions of client experiences

Involving a final sample of 12 physicians and 1,096 clients in the study, the two researchers related each of the three gaps to participants' overall evaluation score on the quality of the medical service. The existence of Gap 1 was supported and found to be negatively related to clients' evaluation of the quality of service provided by the clinic. In other words, for patients, the greater the positive expectation-experience gap (perception of real experiences falls short of expectations), the less was their evaluated quality of the professional service. In addition, Gap 2 and Gap 3 appeared to be influential factors of the overall evaluation score. This implies that although clients' perceptions deserve enormous attention when service quality is under investigation, professional service providers' views are also of great importance in that 'the professional's views, when combined with the clients' perspective, can provide additional insight into areas where change is needed' (p.96). Equally important, patients revealed that when assessing the performance of the received service, they also carefully considered many relevant aspects (e.g., interactions with the doctor's office staff and location convenience, etc.), besides the performance of their doctor. In this case, professionals were advised to 'adopt a broad perspective when defining and examining their service offerings and assessing their clients' evaluations' (p.96).

Distinct from other related studies, the research of Brown and Swartz (1989) involved professional service providers' opinions in addition to the service recipients' and compared the perceptions of both sides. However, it did not directly seek first-hand perceptions of physicians about what or how the medical service should be provided; instead, it paid attention to their perceptions about what patients expect. Moreover, the two researchers failed to show the potential effects of the inconsistency between client and professional perceptions or to explore the nature of the inconsistency.

Brown and Swartz's research is critical, as it has important implications for studies with similar topics in the HE context: service quality perceptions of HE service recipients (e.g., the students) are as important as those of HE service deliverers (e.g., the teachers). To study HE service quality in a more comprehensive way, it is worthwhile investigating and comparing the first-hand perceptions of both sides to see whether they share a common understanding about what makes a quality HE service.

2.2.2.3 Debate over service quality and SERVQUAL

In spite of its popularity as a service quality measurement, SERVQUAL is subject to some shortcomings that have attracted much criticism and limited its effectiveness (Brown et al., 1993). The issue of whether dimensions of the original SERVQUAL could stay constant when applied to different contexts is of great concern. Carrman (1990) points out that although SERVQUAL was developed out of the intention to provide a generic measure with universal application, researchers still have to make a great effort to adjust it to their topic of interest. Scale adaptations through adding, deleting or rewording the items are examples. After testing the SERVQUAL in four industries, Carrman (1990) also suggests that the five proposed dimensions of service quality lack stability and generalisation, and that the number of dimensions might range from one to eight across different industries. Thus, more attention should be paid even to scale adaptation. Furthermore, the validity of the expectation measures is questionable if participants do not have well-formed expectations beforehand. Given diverse research results in terms of dimensionality, Babakus and Boller (1992) suggest that the SERVQUAL may be 'an umbrella construct with distinct dimensions' (p.255), depending on the type of services of interest, but that the number of dimensions that it measures is dubious. Asubonteng et al. (1996), after a critical review, called for further scrutiny of the SERVQUAL by echoing that 'it takes more than the simple adaptation of the SERVQUAL items to address service quality effectively in some situations' (p.77).

In addition to disputes over the underlying dimensions of service quality, SERVQUAL is criticised because of its reliance on the gap score (Teas, 1993). Teas argues that measuring service quality by the E (expected)-P (perceived) service gap model encounters many important problems, one of which is a lack of consistency between the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the E (expectation) concept in the SERVQUAL. The consequence of this inconsistency is a noticeable degree of variance in participants' ratings on the SERVQUAL scale. Teas' research reveals that the response variance is more likely to be due to participants' different understandings of what the term *expectation* means to them rather than differences in their attitudes toward a service. Echoing Teas, Asubonteng et al. (1996) later asserted that measuring expectations would leave researchers with problems and respondents with confusion.

Brown et al. (1993) tested an alternative non-difference score scale using the same items from the original SERVQUAL. Instead of measuring expectations and perceptions separately, the non-difference score technique asks respondents to rate directly 'how their perceptions matched their expectations' on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 'much worse than I expected', through 'neutral', to 'much better than I expected' (Brown et al. 1993, p.132). The non-difference score measure appeared to have a better psychometric performance than SERVQUAL. Additionally, only 22 items are needed on the non-difference score scale, half that of SERVQUAL, requiring 44 items for respectively measuring expectations (E) and perceived service performance (P). Also focusing on psychometric limitations of using a gap score, Babakus and Boller (1992) found out that people were inclined to place a higher score on 'desired level' (E) than on 'existing level' (P), so the gap score (P-E) is likely to be constantly negative. Additionally, varied operationalisations of the two component concepts for the gap score usually result in diverse factor structures underlying SERVQUAL when it is applied to various contexts.

O'Neill and Palmer (2001, 2004) suggest that educators, from the perspective of practitioners, should focus on the practical value of a measuring tool. Attempting to obtain more understandings of customers' timely and relevant views, O'Neill and Palmer (2001) designed a qualitative longitudinal study to investigate the effects of different survey timings on participants' perception of service quality. The two researchers argue that respondents' perceptions of service quality tend to be changeable over time. They also hypothesise that a customer's rating of a certain service attribute will decline with the passage of time. Respondents' perceptions were surveyed twice: immediately after their purchase (time 't') and one month after their consumption (time 't+1'). The results indicate that there was a general tendency for a decrease in respondents' perceived service quality across all three contexts, but the degree of this decrease varied in relation to different attributes. Specifically, in all cases, the attributes associated with personal contact with service providers declined to the least degree as time passed.

In the context of HE, Hill (1995) similarly carried out a longitudinal study from participants' first to final year of study. Data were collected three times. At the beginning of each year, expectations were measured by asking the same cohort of students to rank the HE service based on the perceived importance that they attached to each contributing factor. They also assessed, according to their actual experience, the perceived performance of the same service factors. The results suggested that, in general, students' expectations were stable over the three years, especially those for academic factors such as course content, teaching quality and teaching methods, and so on. However, their evaluations of real experience were less stable, because the quality level of seven factors (there are 20 factors in total) in the third year was perceived to be lower than that in the previous two years. Interestingly, participants felt that their actual experienced failed to exceed their expectations when it came to academic-related factors.

The debate over the usage of the gap score to measure the quality of service is illuminating for two reasons. First, once again it addresses the dynamic nature of people's service quality evaluations. The potential issue due to individuals' various interpretations of the term expectations reflects how divergent different people's perceptions may be, even though they appear to be thinking of the same concept. An issue, as such, also pertains to the HE process, involving various stakeholders with different priorities and HE experiences. Second, the studies of O'Neill and Palmer (2001) and Hill (1995) demonstrate the heterogeneity of perceived service quality due to the effect of time: not even the perceptions of the same person are stable over time, even if that person is evaluating a service provided by the same institution.

2.2.2.4 Service quality in HE

Service quality for students in general

Following Brown and Swartz (1989), who focused on the evaluation of a professional service, Hampton (1993) examined the professional service offered by HE institutions. Given that people's perception of service quality, as a global judgement, arises from a series of occurrences of satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988), Hampton (1993) argues that improving student satisfaction is a potential way to enhance their perception of the quality of the HE service offered by their universities. Making use of the adapted College Student Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSSQ) designed by Betz et al. (1970), Hampton examined and compared expectations and real educational experiences of a group of 473 participants at a large public west-coast university in the United States. As hypothesised, wider E-E gaps due to higher expectations and less experience were associated with lower overall satisfaction with the university's educational service quality. Moreover, the factor of *quality of education here* was found to be the most powerful indicator of student satisfaction. Students' service quality evaluations were closely connected to their considerations about how their learning experience at the university would help their future career. This result reinforced other related research, where students' concerns about their future career were also found to be of great significance to their university selection and service quality perceptions (e.g., Angell et al., 2008; Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Prasad and Jha, 2013).

Claiming that the research of Hampton (1993) was limited to the characteristics of students in American HE, Kwan and Ng (1999) re-examined Hampton's findings in Asian contexts. Based on Hampton's findings, they attempted to identify context-specific factors underlying service quality from a total of 51 statements tested separately at a university in mainland China and at another in Hong Kong. Unlike Hampton's (1993) findings that 'social life on campus' was the second-most important indicator of perceived HE service quality, students from both mainland China and Hong Kong attached only a little importance to social contact. Instead, they placed emphasis on academic-related factors, such as course content and the facilities available on campus. The importance of academic aspects is also maintained by Athiyaman (1997). Kwan and Ng explain that students from China and Hong Kong seem to be more practice-driven, as they are more likely to interpret HE as an investment to secure their future career. By contrast, those from the American culture regard their interest in their study as the primary key. Furthermore, students from Hong Kong and mainland China held different views about which aspect of HE was most important. Students from mainland China indicated that communication with the university was significant, whereas those from Hong Kong were more pragmatic, because they focused mainly on course assessments.

In light of the study by Kwan and Ng, students' service quality perceptions could be linked to context. In other words, international students who are from different cultural backgrounds and are studying in different destination countries are likely to hold different views on what constitute quality HE. For the current study, whose focus is on Chinese students pursing HE in a UK Russell Group university, it thus seems essential to re-examine service quality in this particular context to capture the unique academic experience and expectation of the target population and to display the dynamic nature of their service quality perceptions.

Service quality for international students in particular

When it comes to international students, having a good understanding of their perceived service quality is particularly important. The primary reason is their role as valued customers who need substantial funds for overseas study (Sherry et al., 2004). Hill (1995) highlights students' role as 'primary customers' in UK HE and calls for necessary actions, ranging from managing the staff of the universities to having concern regarding the expectations of students. In order to do so, UK universities should ‘shift from being product-led, i.e. relying on the product to sell, towards a more ‘customer-led’ approach’ (Angell et al., 2008, p.237). Similarly, Wright and O’Neill (2002, p.37) advocate that educational institutions should shift their motivation from ‘what works for us’ to ‘what works for the customer’.

As ‘primary customers’ of HE, students are likely to develop expectations of their learning experiences beforehand. For international students in particular, Janes (2011) notes that they usually form a number of strong expectations about British culture and society in advance of their arrival, but that some of these will not be met by their succeeding experiences in reality. The quality of educational provision is the most influential expectation in international students’ decision to study abroad (Gray et al., 2003). They firmly expect to receive high-quality education, believed to provide a competitive edge for their future career and life (Prasad and Jha, 2013). This research argues that efforts to gain a better understanding about what international students expect, as well as what they actually experience, would be a start to the improvement of HE service quality. As Lillyman and Bennett (2014) suggest, it is paramount for host universities to identify the E-E or P-E mismatches at early stage of international students’ learning experience, otherwise the effect of cultural difference tends to be more severe.

The second important reason why an insight into international students’ perceived service quality is important is that it can bring benefits to the quality of HE (Tan and Kek, 2004). Shekarchizadeh et al. (2011) suggest that better-understood service quality would give universities an advantage in competition, and that ‘information on service quality gaps helps managers to diagnose where performance improvement can be best targeted’ (p.69). As argued in the UK government White Paper on HE, the increasingly competitive international market for HE has the ability to impel the enhancement of academic quality (DfES, 2003). Beyond bringing economic benefits, international students exert a positive impact on ‘the current and future health of UK further and HE’, recognised by Burslem (2004, p.6), the former president of UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) and by other researchers such as Ramachandran (2011). Consequently, it is sensible to ‘testify to the provision of quality education’ in the United Kingdom through the lens of learning experience of international students (Gu, 2009, p.39). The tested and accordingly enhanced service quality would, in turn, maintain or even increase the image and the share of the United Kingdom in the international student market (De Vita and Case, 2010). Furthermore, the extent to which international students’ expectations match their experiences and they are satisfied with the host university is vital to student retainment (Silva and Fernandes, 2010). Many HE managers recognise that obtaining a better understanding of international students’ perceived service quality is an integral part of their job responsibilities (Wright and O’Neill, 2002).

However, the application of service quality in the HE context is subject to controversy. The bone of contention is how appropriate it is to see HE as a service (as discussed in section 1.2). The massive growth in the HE sector has attracted both government and university leaders' interest in how HE institutions should be organised and managed (Bleiklie, 2011). Cuthbert (1996) presents two different opinions representing the bi-poles of the political spectrum. On the one side, many people esteem HE as 'a pure public good and thus should be freely available to all' (p.11). On the other side, people argue that HE is actually a service to be consumed because it 'fails on the public good test of non-excludability as it is quite clear that HE is not freely available to all' (p.11-12). Nowadays, there is an obvious tendency to favour the latter political standpoint and to replace the idea – that universities should be viewed as a distinguishable kind of organisation – with a preference to operate universities as market-type organisations (Bleiklie, 2011). Cuthbert upholds the status of HE as a service by pointing out that it exhibits the three distinctive characteristics of service quality proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985). Likewise, Schostack (1977) maintains that teaching and learning are the most intangible things of all. When illustrating how HE displays the inseparability, Yeo (2008) highlights the interactive process of educational activities (e.g., lectures and seminars): when students are involved, they are simultaneously part of the input source, making unique contributions to the output of these activities. Both Schostack and Yeo have attempted to demonstrate the possibility to see HE as a type of service.

Many scholars have considered debatable the role of international students as HE 'primary consumers'. In the first place, this notion contributes to international students' position as consumers of an education service, rather than university students, so they are more likely to form high-level expectations of HE quality in the host country and suffer the negative consequences of unmet expectations (Lobo and Gurney, 2014). In addition, the customer-led paradigm is questionable because its 'customer is always right' principle cannot be adopted completely in HE and the 'academic-as-service-provider' concept tends to downplay the status of academic staff, whose professional autonomy might be negatively affected (Scott, 1999). Away from student satisfaction, attention should be shifted to the very core task of HE – cultivating capable graduates with 'skills and talents valued by public and private corporations' (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004, p.40). In the book *The Idea of Higher Education*, Barnett (1990) debates the meaning of the term *Higher Education* and argues that:

> An educational process can be termed *Higher Education* when the student is carried on to levels of reasoning which make possible critical reflections on his or her experiences, whether consisting of propositional knowledge or knowledge through action. … Simply, '*Higher Education*' resides in the higher-order states of mind. (p.202)

In light of the core task and meaning of HE, Gibbs (2001) claims that HE institutions have an obligation to resist regarding HE as a commodity and academic achievement merely as a qualification that signifies ownership of a commodity that is useful for employment success. Otherwise, HE would be defined by the market, at the cost of losing its core function and public trust (ibid.). Further, Scott (1999, p.198-199) maintains that introducing theories from marketing to HE should not

> involve a dramatic shift of power from educator to student but does suggest that in order to achieve service quality the expectations of students need to be taken into account and ideally, their views and those of the educator be brought into harmony. (Scott, 1999, pp.198-199)

Nevertheless, not every researcher agrees that regarding students as customers and HE as a service has a questionable nature. For example, Angell et al. (2008, p. 239) claim that ‘refuting the idea of student as a university customer on such grounds is narrow’, as the student–academic relationship is only a part of abundant experiences in HE. Although recognising that the aim of education is to make students ready for the future, Jaraiedi and Ritz (1994) argue that potential employers should be regarded as the primary customers, and students the secondary. In Joseph and Joseph’s (1998) view, students are the primary beneficiaries of education, which makes them primary customers. In this case, other stakeholders of HE, such as parents, future employers or society at large, are secondary beneficiaries. Yeo (2008) develops this view and states that the interplay between the two categories of beneficiaries is largely context-based. For example, students are customers of teachers when they are in lectures; however, when students put in effort on an assignment under their teachers’ specific requirements, the roles are exchanged.

Taking into account the effects of customer input on perceived service quality and trying to extend students’ role as customers, Kelly et al. (1990, p.316) propose viewing customers as ‘partial employees’ – ‘temporary participants in the service delivery process of the service organization’. They argue that customers possibly are able to

> gain an appreciation of specific organizational values, develop the abilities necessary to function within a specific organization, gain an understanding of what the organization expects of them, and gain the knowledge necessary to interact with employees and other customers. (Kelly et al., 1990, p.318)

In this case, to achieve a high service quality of education, it would be more efficient if both sides – teachers of host universities and international students – could take on the obligation to make an effort. As Cadman (2000) suggests when appealing for more dialogue between the academics of host universities and international students from divergent cultures, ‘the challenge to learn is on both sides. Valid “transcultural” education requires that the values of Western academic tradition be critiqued through the perceptions and experiences of international scholars’ (p.475).

Apart from playing an important role, whether as students, customers or partial employees, and bringing benefits to the host country, the idea that international students’ perceptions of HE quality at host universities need more attention is due to the additional and special problems that they might encounter in a new culture. Phenomena such as cultural shock (Adler, 1975; Oberg, 1960), difficulties in building up new social networks (Cao and Zhang, 2012; Cohen and Wills, 1985; Ward and Kennedy, 1992), learning shock in an unfamiliar learning and teaching environment (Griffiths et al., 2004), and struggling for psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Searle and Ward, 1990) are common examples of the problems that international students have to tackle. It is imperative for host universities to have a better understanding of what international students expect in terms of what high-quality HE should offer and how they perceive their actual HE experience, thereby identifying and managing possible gaps to help them to move into the host academic culture (Sherry et al., 2004) and maximise their academic success. Similarly, as Oldfield and Baron (2000) argue, what a high-quality education is supposed to constitute should rest partly on what students want to be included, rather than wholly on the educational organisations' decisions.

This research maintains that making an evaluation of HE service is a constructive process in which different HE participants, especially teachers and students, make a joint contribution. Within the scope of this study, the research of Oldfield and Baron (2000) and Cadman (2000) is illuminating as it explicitly highlights the necessity of examining service quality from both students' and academics' perspectives. However, the two do not acknowledge sufficiently the dynamic nature of individuals' perceptions of HE service quality. As has been reviewed so far, these perceptions could be greatly affected by the passage of time, the specific context (e.g., the evaluators' cultural background and the destination country). Furthermore, this research argues that service quality perceptions are perhaps also affected by the role of evaluators. For instance, international students may expect the quality of HE offering to be quite different from how the academic staff of host universities regard it. It is extremely important to understand whether the two parties are on the same page when improvement of the HE service quality or the learning/teaching experience is the target.

Plenty of empirical research has been carried out to investigate international students' service quality perceptions, and many studies have employed the SERVQUAL in various forms. Shekarchizadeh et al. (2011) performed a gap analysis on the basis of the data collected by a modified version of SERVQUAL. The study involved 522 postgraduate international students from the top five Malaysian universities. The modified SERVQUAL instrument contains altogether 35 items, with five dimensions assessing the HE offered by the universities: *professionalism, reliability, hospitality, tangibles* and *commitment*. The findings reveal that, for all five dimensions, respondents' expectations about what the involved universities should offer were greater than their perceptions of the education service performance. Thus, respondents were not pleased about the service quality at any of the five institutions. The researchers explained that the most likely reason for the identified gaps and consequent feelings of dissatisfaction is that international students, influenced by their good impressions of some American and Western well-established universities, tended to form similarly high expectations of Malaysian universities.

Another study by Furrer et al. (2000) questioned whether the five underlying dimensions of the original SERVQUAL have equal significance for individuals from different cultures – in other words, whether their culture exerts a great effect on their service quality expectations and perceptions of performance. In America they surveyed 302 international students from different origins (e.g., United States, China, Korea, etc.). The results indicated that 'the relative importance of the service quality dimensions varies from one culture to another' (p.366). For instance, an *individualism* culture was defined as that of 'societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family' (Hofstede, 1991, cited in Furrer et al., 2000, p. 360). Students from cultures emphasising individualism attach little importance to the dimension *Ansurance*: 'due to their self-confidence and self-responsibility, individualists do not expect to be assured by service providers' (p.363). *Power distance* refers to 'the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally' (p.359). For those from cultures with a large power distance, customers who are less powerful than the service providers perceive it as quite important to be reassured during consumption.

Involving not only international but also local students, the research of Sherry et al. (2004) discovered that the E-E gap for international students was greater than that for local students, and that international students had higher expectations of the education provided by the university involved. The researchers argued that international students expected more because they had to pay higher tuition fees than their local peers. For international students, the biggest gap lies in the *assurance* dimension with regard to university staff's ability to understand students' needs. This is in line with the findings of Hellsten (2002, p.7) that international students expect host institutions staff to be 'caring' and supportive. Sometimes a little support from academic staff, such as patient listening, may convey a feeling of reassurance to students and therefore enhance their perception of experience (Hill, 1995). In the study conducted by LeBlanc and Nguyen (1999), the effect of paying high tuition fees on international students' perception of service quality has also been supported. The evidence is that not only high-quality education, but a range of reasonable tuition fees, could improve student satisfaction. If an institution intends to charge a higher level of tuition fees than others, it should promote its image accordingly, to remain competitive in attracting new students.

Specifically focused on HE institutions in the United Kingdom, Ibrahim and colleagues (2013) distributed a marginally adapted SERVQUAL scale to 200 Chinese and Taiwanese postgraduate and undergraduate students. The study was conducted with three key objectives: to obtain information about the expectations of international students on the HE offering at Scottish universities; to measure their perceptions of the HE actually delivered; and to compare these two kinds of information and identify gaps. After an 'item-by-item' comparison, the widest E-E gap was identified as being the *assurance* dimension: '*I am confident that the money I spent on the degree is worth the quality of education service offered'* (p.26). Generally, it could be concluded that the mean score was further confirmed by the results of 'dimension-by-dimension' analysis; that is to say, there was a statistically significant and positive E-E gap (higher expectations and less experience) among the participants at the involved Scottish universities, resulting in a high level of dissatisfaction.

2.2.2.5 Alternative models for measuring service quality in HE

Along with the recognised importance of and the active debate over service quality are continuous attempts to develop an alternative instrument to SERVQUAL, ideally one that is applicable to any specific context (Abdullah, 2006a, b). Although a great deal of research has been carried out, the diversity of findings and models put forward from various contexts renders the measurement of service quality highly complex. Thus, figuring out an appropriate and effective instrument with the desired validity, reliability and replicability has gradually become a primary task for service quality investigation in the HE context (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004).

Among various measures, two models – the performance-only model (SERVPERF) and the importance-performance analysis (IPA) – stand out, and both are discussed below.

Performance-only Model (SERVPERF)

One of the most powerful critiques of SERVQUAL is from Cronin and Taylor (1992). The two researchers argue that there is insufficient empirical support for the use of expectation-perceived performance disconfirmation to determine service quality. Similar issues were raised by Parasuraman et al. (1991) themselves, because they discovered that the perceived performance score alone was able to explain from 0.72 to 0.81 variance of the overall service quality score, whereas the gap score accounted for merely a range of 0.57 to 0.71 variance. Luk and Layton (2002) mention that the five gaps that Parasuraman et al. (1985) set out to test by SERVQUAL still suffer from a shortage of evidence.

Instead of relying on the gap score, Cronin and Taylor (1992) propose an alternative model whereby service quality is posited to depend only on customers' perceptions of product performance. Comparing it to SERVQUAL, the two authors believe that their performance-based scale (SERVPERF) is more efficient, as well as more supportive of treating service quality as a form of attitude. Additionally, SERVPERF outperforms SERVQUAL, because the former needs only half the items required by the latter, hence SERVPERF is easier to administer.

Many researchers have reinforced the superiority of SERVPERF over SERVQUAL. For instance, having classified service industries into people-based (e.g. consulting services) and facility/equipment-based (e.g., car washing companies) industries, Lee et al. (2000) compared data collected separately from three firms, namely an entertainment park, an aerobics school and an investment consulting firm. They found that 'performance-based measures of service quality capture more of the variation in service quality than do the difference scores' (p.226).

As an alternative way to measure service quality, SERVPERF, although less popular than SERVQUAL, has some application to HE. Revising the original SERVPERF instrument in accordance with what 333 undergraduates studying business and management deemed essential to a high-quality education, Oldfield and Baron (2000, p.85; p.92) divided perceived service quality into three categories:

- *requisite elements*: those that are essential to enable students to fulfill their study obligations and are solely the responsibilities of academics
- *acceptable elements:* those are desirable but not essential to students
- *functional elements:* those are of a practical and utilitarian nature.

Also, they compared the first- and final-year students' views on each type of service quality. It was found that the final-year students' perception of service quality regarding the 'requisite' and 'functional' elements was reduced over time, while their scores for 'acceptable elements' increased.

Under the influence of SERVPERF, Abdullah (2006a, p.569) put forward the HE PERFmance-only (HEdPERF) scale, 'a new measuring instrument of service quality that captures the authentic determinants of service quality within the HE sector'. The original six-factor HEdPERF, containing 41 items, was modified later by Abdullah (2006b) by comparing it to both SERVPERF and the moderating scale of HEdPERF- SERVPERF (a combination of 28 items from HEdPERF and 22 items from SERVPERF) in the HE context in particular. Altogether, 381 students from six Malaysian universities were recruited. It turned out that a refined HEdPERF instrument with 38 items representing five dimensions displayed the best psychometric performance (Table 2.2). According to Abdullah (2006a, p. 575, 2006b, p. 38), the five identified factors of HE service quality are:

- *Non-academic aspects*: variables that are essential to enable students fulfill their study obligations, related to duties and responsibilities carried out by non-academic staff.
- *Academic aspects*: referring to the responsibilities of academics, and highlights key attributes such as having a positive attitude, good communication skills, allowing sufficient consultation and being able to provide regular feedback to students.
- *Reputation*: items that suggest the importance of higher learning institutions in projecting a professional image.
- *Access:* issues of approachability, ease of contact, availability and convenience.
- *Programme issues:* the significance of offering wide-ranging and reputable academic programmes/specialisations with a flexible structure and syllabus.

Of all the factors, *access* was perceived to be most important influence of the service quality of HE, soon afterwards confirmed by Abdullah's (2006b) other study. *Access* involves issues such as 'approachability, ease of contact and availability of both the academics and non-academics staff' (Abdullah, 2006b, p.44).

Table 2.2: Quantitative comparison of the three scales by Abdullah (2006b, p.43)

Criteria	Modified HEdPERF	SERVPERF	HEdPERF-SERVPERF
Cronbach alpha range	0.81-0.92	0.68-0.76	0.77-0.91
Criterion validity	0.58	0.27	0.53
Construct validity	0.57	0.34	0.57
Adjusted R^2	0.34	0.23	0.30
RMSEA	0.07	0.08	0.08

Importance-performance Analysis (IPA) Model

Importance-performance analysis (IPA), developed by Martilla and James (1977), is another economical and simple instrument of service quality. Its most attractive feature is that 'the results may be graphically displayed on an easily-interpreted, two-dimensional grid' (p.77). Instead of the controversial *expectation* as the baseline, people's *perceptions of importance* of service dimensions are used for comparison to their *perceptions of service performance* that they have experienced. The assumption is that a higher importance rating tends to have more effect on people's overall assessment about service quality, whereas a lower importance rating affects satisfaction to a lesser extent.

The interpretation of the IPA is based on a grid (Figure 2.4) of four quadrants: *Concentrate Here; Keep up the Good Work; Low Priority;* and *Possible Overkill*. It is divided by a horizontal axis of *performance* and a vertical axis of *importance.* Martilla and James (1977) also suggest some tips to use IPA. The first is concerned with identification of service attributes by qualitative methods, such as focus groups and unstructured interviews, to obtain an item pool. The second suggestion is that measuring individuals' perceived importance and performance separately in a questionnaire is helpful in terms of minimising the confounding effects that the two constructs have on each other.

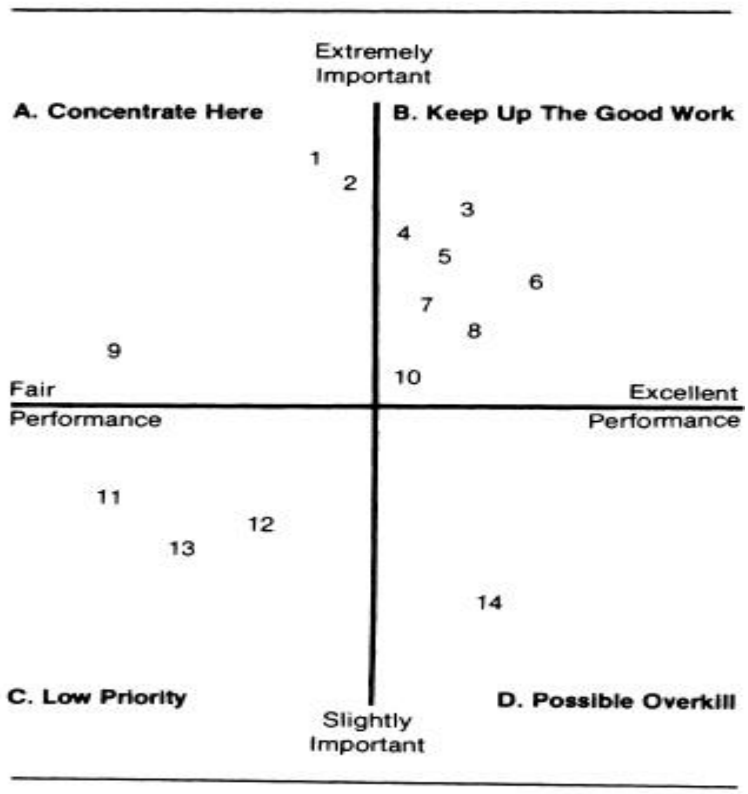


Figure 2.4: Example of Importance-Performance grid by Martilla and James (1977, p.78)

Joseph and Joseph (1997) are examples of pioneers who have used IPA in the context of HE. To justify IPA, they first pointed out that the five dimensions of SERVQUAL were not genetic enough for various situations. Moreover, SERVQUAL assumed respondents' expectations to be stable. However, as students become more familiar with the education service, their expectations will change. The last-raised shortcoming of using SERVQUAL was that some students' expectations prior to their study in HE lack validity. According to the expectation disconfirmation model and SERVQUAL, previous experiences can dramatically influence the formation of expectations, which will then be taken as a standard for later experience. Nevertheless, students normally have little or no previous experience of HE before they actually have the chance to enter it.

Given these disadvantages of SERVQUAL in HE research, Joseph and Joseph (1997) employed IPA instead. Following Martilla and James's (1977) suggestion, they conducted a two-stage study. In the first place, focus groups were organised to identify the relevant factors of service quality of HE in New Zealand. Thereafter, a random sample of 1,000 final-year business students were invited to complete a questionnaire containing items regarding an overall perception of an excellent educational service quality, *perceived importance* of each attribute, *perceived performance* of current universities, and some demographic information.

By means of factor analysis, a model (Figure 2.5) with seven factors was developed to represent the service quality of HE in New Zealand. According to the model, the seven factors are a*cademic* *reputation, career opportunities, programme issues, cost/time, physical aspects, location* and *other*. However, the factors have different levels of importance. More specifically, *academic reputation* (pertaining to academic reputation and the availability of professional academics) was perceived by the respondents to be the most significant factor for excellence in HE, followed by *career opportunities* (pertaining to graduates' career prospect and the availability of information on career opportunities). When it comes to service quality, all factors, other than university *location*, displayed negative differences due to the high scores of perceived importance yet low scores of perceived performance, indicating that 'New Zealand universities have not achieved a high perceived level of service quality which could give them a competitive advantage' (p.18). Nevertheless, 67% of the respondents felt fairly satisfied with their actual learning experience. The authors were wary that, although factors A-F were located in the 'Keep up the Good Work' quadrant, as shown in the grid (Figure 2.5), they were very close to the left 'Concentrate here' section, containing factor G. Thus, they suggested that efforts should be made to improve the performance of all factors, and that regular inspection is necessary.

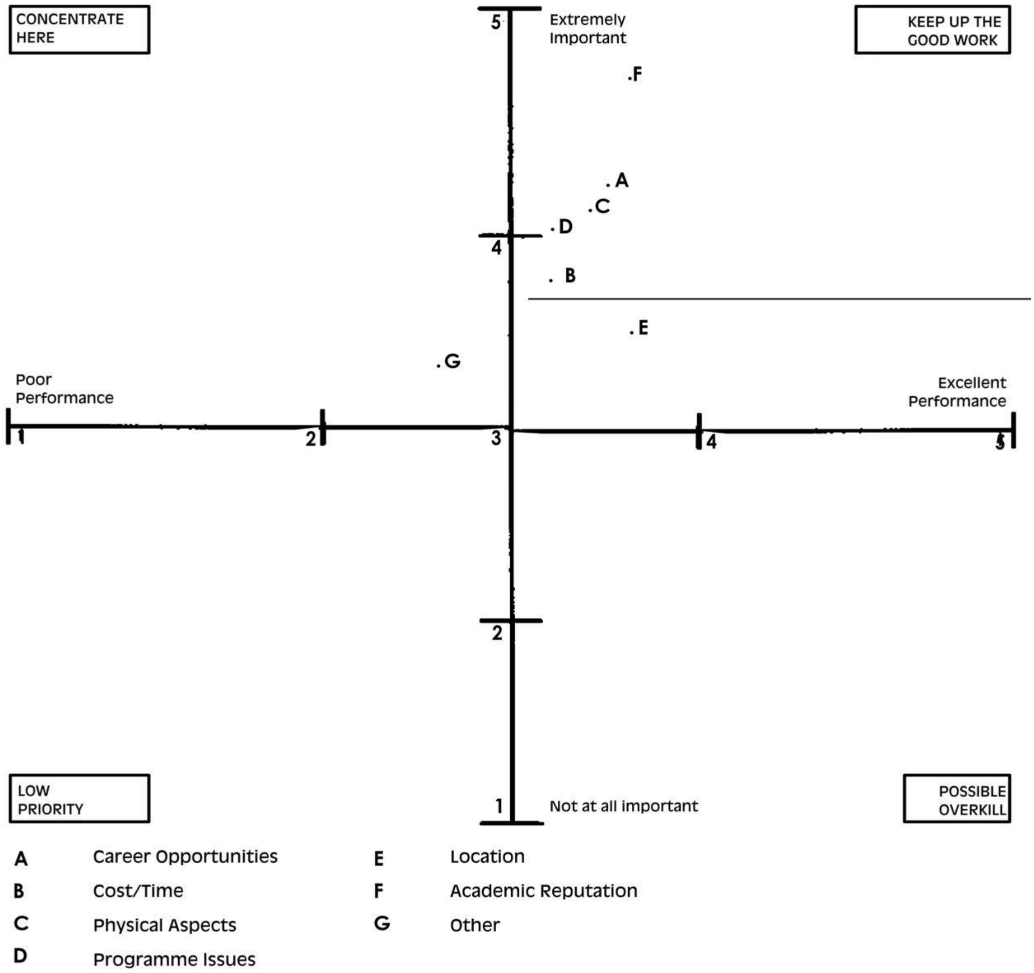


Figure 2.5: Importance-performance Grid of HE New Zealand by Joseph and Joseph (1997, p.20)

The wide application of IPA to HE research also raises an inconsistency regarding what attributes and dimensions are important to high service quality. Thus, it seems that the challenge of measuring service quality in HE lies, above all, in determining the relevant and crucial attributes and dimensions of HE service (Abdullah, 2006b). Angell et al. (2008) investigated service quality among postgraduates in UK universities. Similar to Joseph and Joseph (1997), they interviewed 18 postgraduates to elicit the service factors that they perceived to be significant. A pool of 20 attributes was identified, and these were tested by an online survey involving in total 170 respondents. The results of factor analysis revealed that the findings differed from Joseph and Joseph's (1997), as only four factors were identified: *academic*, *leisure*, *industry links*, and *cost/value for money*.

The importance-performance grid (Figure 2.6) showed that the *academic* factor was deemed to be the most important by postgraduates, which to some extent is consistent with the findings of Joseph and Joseph (1997). The second-most important factor, *industry link,* was also similar to the referent of *career opportunities* identified by Joseph and Joseph (1997). Figure 2.6 indicates that three out of four factors suffered from 'a quality deficit' (p.251), and the *industry-link* factor needed to be seen as a priority for the future. Therefore, the research suggested that universities should undertake the IPA regularly for the sake of a better understanding about what aspects of HE students believe to be crucial, and a clearer idea of where to allocate efforts and resources effectively to make a corresponding improvement in education performance. The advantage of undertaking the IPA is reinforced by Ford et al. (1999), suggesting that resources can be allocated in a more effective way if HE institutions are well aware of students' 'zone of tolerance' (p.178).

Specifically paying attention to Chinese international students, the recent work of To et al. (2014) investigated the attributes exerting *important* effects on participants' decision-making in choosing a host university and the *perceived performance* of the chosen university based on their real experiences therein. The factor analysis results of all attributes revealed five most influential factors: *programme reputation*, *recognition of university qualifications, safety, availability of course information* and the *cost of living in the host cities*. The sequent importance-performance diagram indicates that two attributes – a safe place to study and the likelihood of experiencing discrimination in the chosen place – are of both high importance and performance, and are statistically salient, hence fall into the 'Keep up the Good Work' section of the grid. The attribute concerning cost of living is located in the 'concentrate here' quadrant (high importance and low performance), suggesting that although students were fully aware how much it will cost to study in the host university, they were not satisfied with the amount of money that they actually had to invest. In terms of limitations, the researchers acknowledged that the study has only a restricted ability to be generalised to other contexts, as the data were collected only among cross-border Chinese students enrolled in the universities of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao.

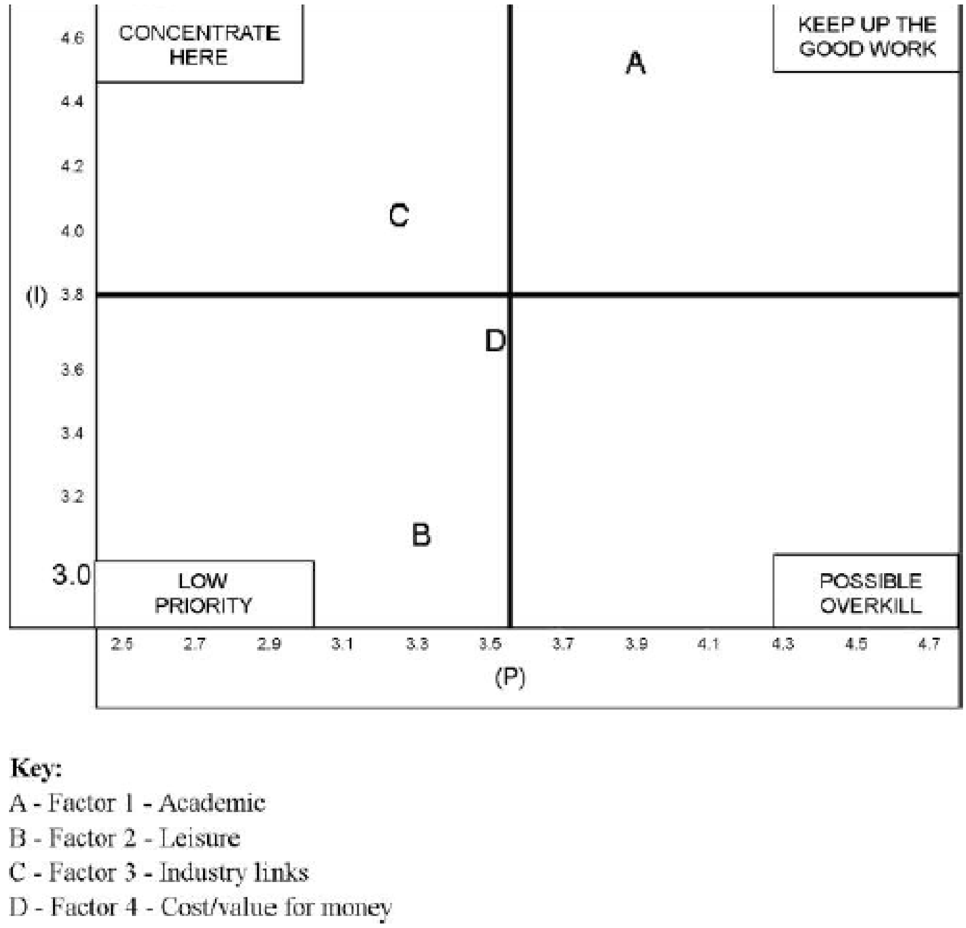


Figure 2.6：Importance-performance (IPA) grid of postgraduate service factors by Angell et al. (2008, p.250)

As there are various measuring instruments for service quality in the literature and many researchers wrestle with the tough decision of which is better than the others, Brochado (2009) empirically compared five service quality measures in the context of HE: SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1998), importance-weighted SERVQUAL, SERVPERF (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), importance-weighted SERVPERF, and HEdPERF (Abdullah, 2006a). The idea of taking into account the relative importance of each service quality dimension was enlightened by the IPA model (Martilla and James, 1977). Data were collected from a sample of 360 students of a Portuguese university (all from the same faculty). The questionnaire was made up of five parts: a) questions for demographic information; b) 51 items extracted from SERVPERF, SERVQUAL or HEdPERF for students' perceptions; c) statements about five dimensions of service quality to which students were asked to allocate a total of 100 points, according to their perception of the importance of each dimension; d) items seeking for students' overall evaluation of service quality, satisfaction, their intention for future visit and their wiliness to recommend the department to a friend in the future; and (e) two open-ended questions to elicit participants' views on how the service quality of the university could be enhanced and on the best service aspect that they associate with that university. A seven-point Likert scale was used to obtain students' response, 1 referring to 'strongly disagree' and 7 'strongly agree'. The scores obtained were compared to give the perception-expectation gap scores.

The five scales were tested and compared in terms of unidimensionality, reliability, validity and explained variance. In the test of unidimensionality, the results of confirmatory factor analysis indicated that all the five scales provided a good model fit (x^2 test statistic ranged from 712 to 1109, and p<0.01 for all). Moreover, each showed a fair fit, based on the RMSA indicator (RMSA fell between 0.056 and 0.080). Nevertheless, the importance-weighted SERVPERF and importance-weighted SERVQUAL presented the best model fit, based on the RMSA indicator. In terms of reliability, Cronbach's α coefficient was used as an indicator. The results suggested a high level of internal consistency among the items comprising each dimension, considering Cronbach's α coefficient of SERVPERF (ranged from 0.719 for responsiveness to 0.819 for reliability), importance-weighted SERVPERF scale (from 0.924 for responsiveness to 0.958 for reliability), SERVQUAL (from 0.758 for tangibles to 0.827 for empathy), importance-weighted SERVQUAL (from 0.811 for assurance to 0.902 for empathy), and HEdPERF (from 0.792 for responsiveness to 0.918 for the non-academic dimension). Importance-weighted SERVPERF displayed the best reliability performance. Regarding construct validity, SERVPERF provided higher relations than the other four measures, thus indicating greater performance. The last test was to investigate the ability of each scale to explain the total variation in the overall service quality. The greatest explained variance was identified in SERVPERF, followed by HEdPERF.

In general, Brochado (2009) concluded that SERVPERF and HEdPERF showed a better measurement capacity in the HE context than the other three measures, although it was impossible to observe which was the best. It is worth noting that participants in the study were from the same faculty of a single university, which makes the results limited with regard to generalisation.

2.2.2.6 Dimensionality of service quality in HE context

Although measuring service quality can provide useful information for enhancing education quality, student learning experience and student satisfaction, determining the dimensions of HE service is a precondition of its measurement (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996). However, in view of the diverse results of studies involved in previous sections, the precondition as such seems to be the foremost challenge of the HE context. Diverse research findings, in turn, provide some evidence for Harvey and Green's (1993) conclusion that quality in education is more a 'stakeholder-relative' concept than one with only a 'single correct definition' (p.74). Moreover, the degree to which general characteristics of service quality identified by research of other fields are appropriate for the HE context is controversial (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003).

Apart from the applicability of general dimensions identified from other fields, the need for context-specific dimensions contributes to the complexity of measuring service quality in the HE context. Echoing Soutar and McNeil (1996), Lagrosen et al. (2004) maintain that, in spite of the undeniable value of those general quality characteristics, additional attention should be paid to find out the unique quality dimensions specifically catering to HE. Based on 29 in-depth interviews, they thus developed a seven-point Likert scale, which was distributed to 264 students from an Austrian university and to 184 students from a Swedish university. After factor analysis of the survey data, seven sufficiently important (scores significantly higher than five on the seven-Likert scale) service quality dimensions of HE were identified and compared to those general service quality dimensions proposed by Zeithaml et al. (1990) (presented in Table 2.3). The comparison results suggest that service quality dimensions specifically related to HE have some consonance with those from general service quality research, but there is some inconsonance. Lagrosen et al. emphasise that the inconsonance necessitates more attempts to identify what it is that the service quality of HE distinctively consists of.

Further, the mean scores of each dimension indicated by Austrian and Swedish students were compared, and four of the seven dimensions (marked * in Table 2.3) were found to differ significantly. The different degrees of importance attached by Austrian and Swedish students to each dimension reflected the findings of Lagrosen's (2003) earlier work that cultural characteristics have a great effect on how quality managers from specific cultural backgrounds value quality dimensions. In this case, students from different cultural backgrounds should not be considered as a homogenous group, despite the use of the shared term 'international students' (Tran, 2011). Conversely, if the cultural heritage of international students is not properly understood, 'HE cannot achieve one of its most important goals: to provide quality education for all' (Seo and Koro-Ljungberg, 2005, p.184).

Table 2.3: Comparison between HE-specific and general service quality dimensions (adapted from Lagrosen et al., 2004, p.67)

HE-specific service quality dimensions (Lagrosen et al., 2004)	General service quality dimensions (Zeithaml et al., 1990)
Corporate collaboration	No obvious correspondence
❖ Information and responsiveness	Responsiveness and communication
❖ Courses offered	Possibly competence
Internal evaluations	Reliability and understanding the customer
❖ Computer facilities	Tangibles
❖ Collaboration and comparisons	Credibility
Library resources	Tangibles

Also addressing the influences of different cultures, Ford et al. (1999) studied the notion of service quality through applying the IPA model to two different contexts – New Zealand and USA. After analysing and comparing the qualitative data regarding the important attributes of an excellent HE service quality, the researchers found that although attributes revealed by participants from each cultural setting were similar, they had different underlying factor structures. As a result, it has been suggested that it might be a mistake to develop a single model including all important dimensions of HE service quality and able to fit any cross-cultural context.

However, the service quality dimensions identified in the above studies relied on only the perspectives of students, which makes the findings lack generalisation to other groups of people engaged in HE, such as academic staff. This phenomenon points to the tendency in the current literature for studies on service quality of HE to focus on the students' perspectives.

Though also advocating for an exploration of HE-specific characteristics of service quality, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) place more emphasis on the needs of different types of stakeholders. They maintain that a well-accepted model by a community should be 'sensitive to the expectations of different groups of people involved' and should ideally 'represent the shared vision of the stakeholders' (p.127). Based on Harvey and Green's (1993) research on how to interpret quality in HE context, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003, p.127) discuss the perspectives of four main stakeholders of HE:

- *Providers (funding bodies and community at large)*. Quality is interpreted as 'value for money' (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.21), for funding authorities are looking for a good return on investments.
- *Users of products (courseware) (e.g. both current and prospective students)*. Quality is interpreted as 'excellence' (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.12), in that students want to receive high-quality education to gain a relative advantage in their career prospects.
- *Users of outputs (graduates) (e.g. employers).* Quality is taken as 'fitness for purpose' (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.16), because employers are looking for graduates with the competences to handle the job.
- *The employees of the sector (both academics and administrators)*. Quality is viewed as 'perfection or consistency' (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.15), where the behavioural norms are met and the core ethos is upheld to gain job satisfaction.

Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) raised the issue of whose needs should be met first to improve satisfaction and service quality, given that there are several groups of stakeholders in HE and each tends to have a different understanding of quality. Earlier, Harvey and Green (1993) asked a similar question, 'whose quality', and argued that the diversity of quality understandings is 'not a different perspective on the same thing but different perspectives on different things with the same label' (p.10).

After reviewing the dimensions of service quality proposed by a number of non-educational and education-based studies, Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) presented a model (Figure 2.7) summarising six vital aspects for HE in particular. They claim that stakeholders from diverse sectors of society perceive the importance of each dimension to a different degree. For example, students are interested in and therefore attach greater importance to all these attributes, while employers, as 'users of products', tend to pay more attention to *content* (what graduates have learned and what capabilities they possess) and how *reliable* the universities are when the content is delivered. Apart from having diverse interests in different quality dimensions and different understandings about them, stakeholders of HE might even have conflicting demands that are impossible to satisfy at the same time (Cheng and Tam, 1997). In this case, the question of 'whose quality' will become even more complex.

The diversity in dimensionality supports this research's argument that individuals' perceptions of service quality are dynamic – these perceptions are multifaceted and vary by context. In light of studies by Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) and Owlia and Aspinwall (1996), these perceptions are also subject to the different roles of different HE stakeholders. However, this research has doubts about Owlia and Aspinwall's concern about whose needs are to be met first. It contends that enhancing service quality should not mean catering to the priority of any particular HE stakeholder. By contrast, actively engaging different stakeholders – promoting mutual, transparent dialogues on what constitutes quality HE, identifying the gaps in their understandings/ expectations and strategically working on those gaps – is believed to be a more promising way genuinely to improve HE service quality.

Dimensions	Characteristics
(1) Tangibles	Sufficient equipment/facilities
	Modern equipment/facilities
	Ease of access
	Visually appealing environment
	Support services (accommodation, sports, ...)
(2) Competence	Sufficient (academic) staff
	Theoretical knowledge, qualifications
	Practical knowledge
	Up to date
	Teaching expertise, communication.
(3) Attitude	Understanding students' needs
	Willingness to help
	Availability for guidance and advice
	Giving personal attention
	Emotion, courtesy
(4) Content	Relevance of curriculum to the future jobs of students
	Effectiveness
	Containing primary knowledge/skills
	Completeness, use of computer
	Communication skills and teamworking
	Flexibility of knowledge, being cross-disciplinary
(5) Delivery	Effective presentation
	Sequencing, timeliness
	Consistency
	Fairness of examinations
	Feedback from students
	Encouraging students
(6) Reliability	Trustworthiness
	Giving valid award
	Keeping promises, match to the goals
	Handling complaints, solving problems

Figure 2.7: HE service quality dimensions and their subdivisions by Owlia and Aspinwall (1996, p.19)

2.2.3 Identified gaps and associated research questions

Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 have reviewed a variety of studies from broad fields. The majority concentrate on HE in particular. These studies shed light on how the concept of service quality has been variously applied to assessments of HE quality. However, the conceptualisation and operationalisation of service quality components vary with researchers' choices of underlying theoretical framework and the peculiarity of a given context. Despite some differences, the studies reviewed still reveal a tendency to a few common limitations. These account for the rationale of conducting the current study. More importantly, some of the research questions emerged from these identified limitations.

First of all, most investigations on service quality seem to favour the perceptions of service receivers over those of service providers. In the case of the HE research reviewed, student opinions have been disproportionately considered, while teachers' voices tend to be tuned out. This research argues that both teachers' and students' perceptions of their HE expectations and experiences are of great value.

The work by Percy and Salter (1976) is a rare instance where teachers' views are explored in addition to students'. It has fully shown how divergent may be the two groups' service quality perceptions, which justifies the importance of considering both sides. The researchers interviewed lecturers and undergraduates from universities, polytechnics and colleges of education about their understandings of what 'excellence' means in HE. Perceiving the concept of excellence as 'an ideal, extra-personal, fixed standard of attainment to which students should aspire and by which they are measured' (p.459), the staff unanimously linked it to a student's capability to be independent and think critically (Percy and Salter, 1976). They regarded HE principally as a learning situation where student learning is of the essence. However, ambiguities, confusions and contradictions were also identified in the perceptions of staff teaching different subjects and courses. For example, some teachers from the music school took a good command of music theory as excellence in students, while some others valued highly a student's potential to be an excellent performer. From the students' perspectives, nevertheless, the concept of excellence was less prominent; instead, they looked forward to a presence of intellectual stimulus and excitement in teaching.

Regretfully, Percy and Salter built their study on data collected for a project with a different research aim. The use of secondary data has limitations in terms of providing pertinent information about teachers' and students' expectations, experiences and perceived service quality, as well as enabling a further level of comparison between these components.

Second, the studies reviewed, especially those in section 2.2.2.6, suggest that the applicability of service quality across different contexts remains a vexed issue. The stability of its dimensionality is highly subject to the peculiarity of a specific context. Moreover, the extent to which its dimensions are generated by studies in fields that are compatible with an HE setting is controversial (e.g., Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). Therefore, it is worth the effort to scrutinise service quality in a new context, such as where both academics of UK HE and Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom are engaged.

Taking into account the two identified inefficiencies above, the following two research questions are therefore formulated.

1. From the perspective of international students and academic staff at UK universities, what is service quality of the HE provided by the current university?
2. Are teachers' and international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university significantly different from one another?

Third, most of the reviewed studies tend to treat service quality in evaluators' mind-set as something fixed, rather than dynamic. It is primarily evident in the dominant practice of collecting people's perceived service quality at a single point in time, regardless of the changes in their perceptions thereafter with accumulating HE experiences. The tendency to regard the service quality of HE as fixed impedes our insights into the possible patterns in people' changing perceptions over time.

There is theoretical support for the belief that the length of consumers' service experience is a potential variable of their perception of service quality. Abercrombie (1967) stresses that, as time passes, perceptions of experiences are not stationary, because 'experiences which at first were defined and separate from each other, tend to become associated and confused' (p.19). Likewise, many marketing researchers (e.g., Boulding et al., 1999; Solomon et al., 1999) state that time is one of the most precious resources, able to influence many stages of consumers' decision-making process and their behaviour, as well as their perception of a service. For example, Boulding et al. (1999) demonstrate how individuals update their perceptions of a firm's service quality with the passage of time in two studies: one a longitudinal laboratory experiment and the other using a cross-sectional questionnaire. They suggest that a firm should improve its service quality by managing consumers' developing expectations. In the context of HE, O'Neill (2003) also found that students' perceptions of an attribute were different at the two investigated periods of their study. Some 21 of the 22 SERVQUAL items were rated statistically differently over time: students' expectations increased, but their overall perception of service quality decreased.

In this research, it is believed that Chinese students are actively involved in UK HE. They obtain varying degrees of intercultural adjustment at different periods of their overseas study and inhomogeneous learning experiences. In this situation, it will be informative to learn more about how their expectations, experiences and perceptions of HE service quality might evolve with their changing levels of intercultural adjustment and diverse HE experiences. This is similar to the case of academic staff of UK universities: their perceived service quality is developing as well, for many potential reasons such as their accumulating various teaching experiences in UK HE, new demands from the more diverse student composition or more interaction with Chinese students.

At the same time, the tendency to fix perceived service quality is also associated with the solo usage of questionnaires to collect quantitative data. This prevalent practice in the existing literature limits our deeper understandings of individuals' service quality perceptions – how UK universities can provide HE with service quality desirable to students, or how academics/students think their current university could improve its service quality of HE in future.

In view of the third identified gap, the following research questions are proposed:

3. What is the change pattern (if any) in international students' and teachers' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university after accumulating experience of participation in UK HE over time?
4. From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how can a high quality of HE be provided by universities in the United Kingdom?
5. From the perspectives of its international students and academic staff, how can service quality of HE be improved at the university?

2.3 Intercultural adjustment

2.3.1 Introduction

Section 2.2 reviewed the concept of service quality and its wide application to the HE context. In this section, the theoretic focus shifts to the notion of intercultural adjustment, to which Chinese students' perception of the quality of the HE service provided by their host UK university is linked. As a consequence, the current study is unlike most of the reviewed studies, in which student satisfaction was taken as the primary issue relating to HE service quality.

The continuous and increasing influx of sojourners who travel abroad to work and live in countries alien to their native land has now become a common phenomenon in our interconnected world. The resulting widespread notion of intercultural adjustment has attracted a great deal of academic attention. However, the definition of intercultural adjustment is neither consistent nor agreed, despite various investigations and theoretical reviews by many researchers.

After a broad review of 245 measurement items for intercultural adjustment and in-depth interviews with the international human resource personnel responsible for overseas assignment selection, Tucker (1974) found that one of the haunting problems of contemporary literature is the absence of a common definition of intercultural adjustment. In a later comprehensive review of sojourners' adjustment, Church (1982, p.562) similarly concludes that 'concepts and theory remain underdeveloped in the sojourner adjustment literature'. Ady (1995) contributes to the complexity by asserting that sojourner adjustment needs to be distinguished from cross-cultural adjustment, in that the former term suggests a less permanent stay in and adaptation to the host culture. Even more recently, Kim (2001, p.11) states in her book, 'although this field has benefited from rich information and insights, it suffers from increased disconnectedness and confusion as well'. All these comments offer us a glimpse of how difficult it is to uniformly define and operationalise the concept of intercultural adjustment.

This section displays the diverse interpretations of intercultural adjustment in three categories: at a social level (collective/individual); at an evaluative level (problem/development); and at a procedural level (process).

2.3.2 Intercultural adjustment at group and individual levels

When it comes to intercultural adjustment, existing understandings, even though diverse, can be classified as group-level or individual-level (Kim, 2001). However, early researchers examined intercultural adjustment through the lens of a different term – acculturation. In 1930s, three researchers, from the perspectives of anthropology, gave a widely recognised definition: 'acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either/or both groups' (Redfield, Linton and Herskovits, 1936, p.149). In situations where acculturation involves changes in both groups, the degree of change experienced by each tends to be different, usually with more change in one than the other (Berry, 1997).

Later on, other researchers explored intercultural adjustment further, through the lens of two recognised types of acculturation. Graves (1967) distinguished *psychological acculturation* from *acculturation* when examining cross-ethnic and within-group differences in social-problem behaviours (such as excessive alcohol assumption) displayed by Indians, Spanish-Americans and Anglo-Americans. More specially, *acculturation* results from changes at a collective level, while *psychological acculturation* refers more to a psychological and behavioural change undergone by an individual. Engagement in social problem behaviours was found to be a consequence of adjustment at both group and individual levels. Graves (1967) explained that a detachment between personal goals and the means provided by society to achieve those goals is likely to be a typical outcome of efforts towards acculturation into another culture. The greater the degree of detachment, the more likely are mental disturbance and socially deviated behaviours to appear among group members. In this sense, group-level acculturation phenomena would significantly influence the psychological state of individuals belonging to that group. In turn, changes of psychology undergone by individuals at a micro-level could exert a great effect on their behaviours, as well as on the process and outcome of acculturation at a macro-level.

However, Berry (1997, p.7) points out that the extent of acculturation that a group and its members experience should not be assumed to be the same, because 'while the general changes may be profound in the group, individuals are known to vary greatly in the degree to which they participate in these community changes'. Viewed from this angle, Arends-Toth and Vijver (2006) advocate the understanding of acculturation to be a micro-level phenomenon interwoven with the influences from the macro-level. Accordingly, they define the micro-level acculturation as 'changes that an individual experiences as a result of contact with one or more other cultures and of the participation in the ensuing process of change that one's cultural or ethnic group is undergoing' (p.34).

Regarding intercultural adjustment as a group-level phenomenon, the degree and direction of changes experienced by the engaged communities largely depend on the distribution of 'resources, power and prestige' (Kim, 2001, p.13). Berry (1997) employs the terms *dominant* and *non-dominant* to describe the unequal power relationships between different groups. Alongside those attempting scientifically to rationalise and permanently maintain the hierarchical cross-group power differences, some even presume that it is the non-dominant group members' obligation to make themselves accepted by and become part of the dominant group, even at the expense of giving up their own cultural identity (UNESCO, 1985). Such intercultural adjustment is normally termed *assimilation* that, according to Berry and Kim (1988), could also be understood as abandoning the maintenance of original cultural identity and actively seeking contact with members from other cultural groups for the sake of integrating into mainstream culture. Likewise, Ryder et al. (2000) propose the *unidimensional model* to represent a continuum ranging from totally preserving the heritage of the original culture to exclusively adopting the culture of the host country.

However, this assimilation strategy is not necessarily always feasible, as sometimes it is hindered by denial on the part of those in the dominant cultural group who are short of intercultural experience and therefore stereotype individuals from other cultures, or who are not interested in or even deliberately try to avoid intercultural contact (Hammer, 2009). Apart from the dominant group, in many cases other individuals from the original cultural group also have a denial disposition, so that a person striving to attain a new cultural identity at the cost of his cultural origin might be isolated or rejected (Berry, 1997; Lafromboise et al. 1993). Consequently, Ryder et al. (2000) argue that the *bidimensional model*, as they term it, offers a more comprehensive depiction of acculturation because it assumes that the maintenance of the home culture heritage and acquisition of dominant culture identity are independent, and individuals are able to have varying extents of each.

Trying to adjust to the host country, sojourners are prone to display sets of macro-level characteristics that distinguish them from individuals of other groups. Sojourners sharing similar cultural backgrounds might exhibit some common behavioural patterns (Brein and David, 1971). Smith (1956), for instance, discovered that those from certain developing countries are more likely to behave in a similar way to deal with the loss of original cultural identity in the course of their study in the United States. More specifically, students from India were found to be more likely to develop hostile attitudes toward, to hold negative evaluations of and to even retaliate against Americans when they perceived that Americans looked down on Indian culture. By contrast, Japanese students in the United States preferred to avoid interaction with Americans in order to defend themselves and maintain self-esteem. Group-level distinctive characteristics were also supported by Graves (1967), in that Indian participants in this research consumed much more alcohol and therefore were more likely to undertake obsessive drinking than Spanish-Americans, even though both ethnic communities possessed analogous disadvantaged socio-economic status during their acculturation to the dominant American culture.

The distinction between macro- and micro-levels of adjustment has produced a large number of studies exploring the effects of factors at each level of intercultural adjustment. Among those macro-level factors, *cultural distance*, the comparison between sojourners' cultural origin and the host culture, has been widely examined and demonstrated to be able to influence significantly the process and outcome of intercultural adjustment for both the community as a whole and its members as individuals (Searle and Ward, 1990).

Harris et al. (2004) made it possible to quantify the distance between different cultures by means of identifying the characteristics of culture. These characteristics contain aspects connected to sojourners' daily life in the host culture, such as communication and language, dress and appearance, food and eating habits, and interpersonal relationships. Echoing the significant role that day-to-day life plays in sojourners' struggle to adjust to a foreign culture, Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) refer particularly to Chinese international students and claim that the most demanding aspect of studying in the United Kingdom is living a completely different lifestyle and dealing with the consequent psychological and physical changes, not becoming used to an unfamiliar academic environment. To elaborate on why understanding the two different cultural settings interwoven through individuals' adaptation to a foreign country is of great importance, Berry (1997) explains:

> in the society of origin, the cultural characteristics that accompany individuals into the acculturation process need description, in part to understand (literally) where the person is coming from, and in part to establish cultural features for comparison with the society of settlement as a basis for estimating an important factor… that of cultural distance. (p.16)

The issue in terms of whether cultural distance should be considered a friend or foe is still subject to disagreement. Brein and David (1971) claim that more frequent intercultural interactions will lead to increasing and diverse adjustment difficulties, and that all these difficulties could be ultimately ascribed to 'both the obvious and more subtle differences between cultures' (p.215). However, in many cases, the influences of culture on individuals are invisible because what people have learned will 'gradually sink below the surface of the mind' and will therefore exert 'hidden controls… experienced as though they were innate simply because they are not only ubiquitous but habitual as well' (Hall, 1976, p. 42, cited in Gu and Schweisfurth, 2006, p. 74).

In the context of studying in a new culture, Gu and Maley (2008) imply that Hall's viewpoint provides a potential explanation for why a gap between different cultures could become a source of adaptive problems for Chinese international students, in that 'what is regarded as common sense, natural and beneficial in one culture may be viewed as highly idiosyncratic, psychologically uncomfortable, and counter-intuitive in another' (p.226). These culture-related predispositions are usually unconscious but pervasive, and some of them probably produce collisions with the values, attitudes and beliefs of the new environment, especially after cross-border movements (Adler, 1975). Pedersen (1991) summarises that, for international students, the larger the cultural distance, the more complicated the intercultural adjustment tends to be.

Culture-related adjustment difficulties are also found by a small number of studies dedicated to examining the extent of the uniqueness of adjustment problems faced by the host and overseas students (Church, 1982). It seems that the group of international students, on the one hand, shares some adjustment problems with local students. On the other hand, they sometimes have to address particular issues resulting from, or at least exacerbated by, cultural differences (Church, 1982; Gunawardena and Wilson, 2012; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Major, 2005). Nevertheless, Gill (2007) links positive effects to cultural differences and specially mentions that Chinese international students can build up unique and broad views through actively and critically engaging in the macro intercultural environment in which both Chinese and Western perspectives and cultures are accessible.

Regarded as a powerful group-level factor, cultural distance was found to exert an enormous influence on sojourners' psychological state when they are in the process of intercultural adjustment to the host culture. To identify the relationship between acculturative stress and cultural differences, Graham (1983) carried out a five-year study involving first-year international students of an American university who came from nine different countries. Samoans were reported to suffer greater acculturative stress than their peers, and the Samoan lifestyle was also found to differ the most from the Hawaiian lifestyle. Similarly, Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) discovered that sojourners whose culture origin had a greater extent of cultural difference in relation to the host culture appeared to encounter more problems during their intercultural adjustment process than those from other cultures. Furthermore, a large cultural distance brought about a marked divergence in sojourners' values, communication styles and expectations of a counsellor's role, in which case they are likely to underutilise the professional counselling service even when they suffer overwhelming mental disturbance (Zhang and Dixon, 2003).

However, Furnham and Trezise (1983) did not find an influential role for cultural distance when they compared the psychological stress of four groups of overseas students with that of two groups of

British students. Contrary to the results of other studies, British students did not indicate fewer mental problems than participants from the Middle East, Africa or Malaysia. In addition, there was no statistically significant difference in the psychological disturbance experienced by the four groups of foreign students, despite their cultural backgrounds varying considerably. Apart from psychological health, cultural distance was argued to be an influential factor of social skills learning for the improvement of intercultural adjustment, because of the assumption that sojourners from more distant cultures tend to have less appropriate skills to fit into the host culture (Furnham and Bochner, 1986, cited in Zhou and Todman, 2009).

What also contributes to the controversy over the effect of cultural distance is the argument by Cieri et al. (1991) that it is actually people's subjective perception of cultural distance, rather than the real yet less measurable cultural distance, that plays the critical role in their intercultural adjustment experience. Defined by Cieri et al. (1991, p.402) as 'the perception of differences between home and host cultures', *perceived cultural distance* was anticipated to be negatively related to the psychological adjustment of partners of expatriates and repatriate managers. Based on the data collected from a sample of 58 women, however, there was no evidence that *perceived cultural distance* is a vital predictor of participants' psychological changes during their exposure to different cultures. By the same token, LanDis and Bhagat (1996) also distinguish objective from subjective cultural distance. The former consists of 'physical constructions that a people make of their world, the shards that archaeologists puzzle over' (p. 2) and is taken as a distal influence, while the latter pertains to 'social constructions that the same people make of their relations with one another' (p.2) and has more intimate psychological influences (LanDis and Bhagat, 1996).

After a comparative study of Chinese learners in Chinese and UK educational institutions respectively, Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) even cast doubt on the emphasis on cultural difference, because they discovered that participants from the two strikingly contrasting cultural settings were all well motivated and willing to adapt to their British teachers' teaching style. Consequently, the two authors concluded that culture should not be regarded as the sole or deterministic factor for intercultural learning and adjustment, and that other factors, such as student–teacher relationship, interactions between students and the learning environment, also make a great contribution.

In addition to cultural distance, there are macro aspects related to the society of origin and society of settlement with influence on a group's and its individuals' intercultural adjustment (Berry, 1997). For instance, the study by Becker (1968) demonstrates how the economic situations of sojourners' home and host country could exert an effect on patterns of attitudinal and behavioural change in the course of their adjustment to America. Students from India, Israel and Europe were recruited separately to represent underdeveloped, semi-developed and highly developed countries. Data in terms of participants' attitudes toward their home country and the United States were collected in three different phases of the sojourn. It was found that students from the highly developed area initially displayed a more favourable attitude toward the United States than those from underdeveloped and semi-developed areas. Becker (1968) discusses that because of huge cultural differences, Indians and Israelis entered the United States with more anxieties, challenges and even a sense of cultural inferiority that might ‘significantly color their initial experiences and attach a negative meaning to a neutral or even friendly gesture on the part of Americans’ (p.438). However, at the second stage of the sojourn, both Indian and Israeli students’ attitude to the United States improved to a peak and stayed at a similar level to that of European students. This phase was argued to be the most comfortable period for international students from less-developed countries, with their initial problems alleviated or addressed. In the final stage of sojourn, both Indians and Israelis, unlike the Europeans who maintained the highest level of improved attitude, displayed hostile attitudes to the host country again. This hostility might be attributed to students’ feelings that they had to leave America soon and therefore tended to concentrate on its negative aspects. In general, Becker concludes that students from underdeveloped countries experience a reverse pattern of attitudinal change toward the host country, compared to those from highly developed countries.

Another example of macro-level factors of intercultural adjustment is the attitude of the indigenous population toward foreigners. Florkowski and Fogel (1999) maintain that successful adaptation depends in part on the attitudes of local people in the receiving country. Therefore, in the context of an overseas working assignment, they separated expatriates’ intercultural adaption into work adjustment, commitment to the host unit, commitment to the parent company and the desire to withdraw early from the host unit. The attitude of host nationals toward people from other cultures was conceptualised as ethnocentrism; not relying on the actual status, but participants’ perception of the host nationals. As anticipated, data collected from 250 international assignees showed that perceived host ethnocentrism was negatively connected with work adjustment and commitment to the host unit. Furthermore, assignees from different culture origins displayed different patterns of reactions to perceived host ethnocentrism. To be specific, European expatriates, compared to their peers from the United States, tended to respond more negatively to their own perception of ethnocentrism by host nationals.

Despite numerous studies whose foci was group-level intercultural adjustment or macro-level influential factors, there are more investigations dealing with intercultural experiences of individual sojourners as well as the associated individual-level variables (Kim, 2001). Zhou and her colleagues (2008) provide a comprehensive model (Figure 2.8) to depict the dynamic process of intercultural adjustment and its related variables at different levels. This model contains not only macro-level factors related to the society of origin and society of settlement, but also individual-level factors, such as personal characteristics and special situations. The middle part of the model shows that both societal and individual factors affect a sojourner’s adjustment process and the outcomes that can finally be achieved in the host country. In their systematic review of 64 studies on predictors of psychosocial adjustment of international students in America, Zhang and Goodson (2011) also claim that intercultural adjustment to a foreign country should be regarded as a consequence of both micro- and macro-level factors, and therefore call for future research to integrate variables at both levels.

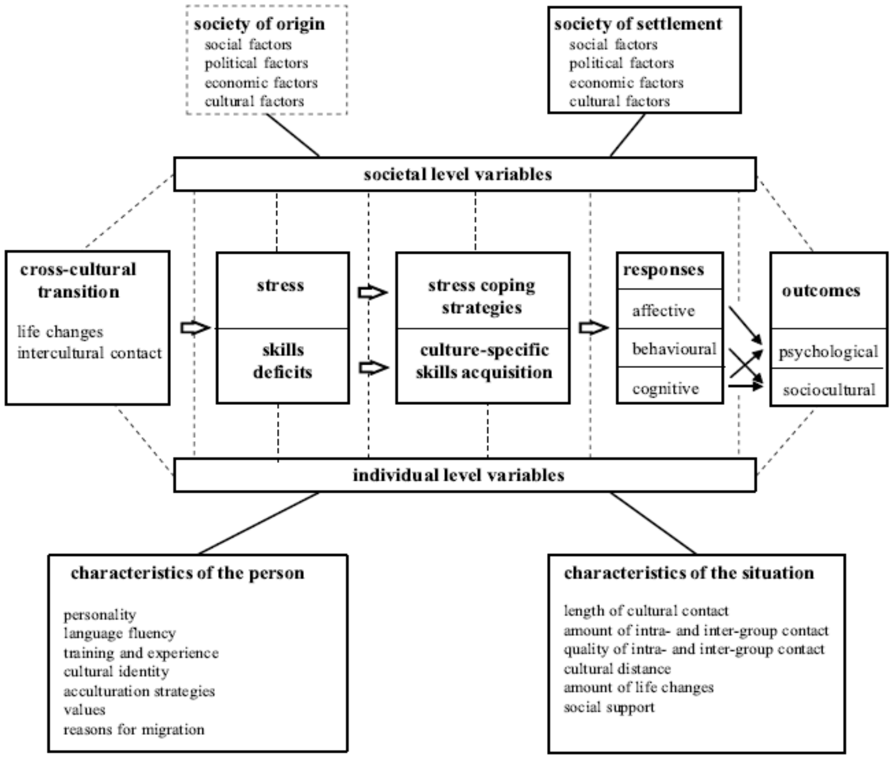


Figure 2.8: Acculturation process by Zhou et al. (2008, p. 69)

2.3.3 Intercultural adjustment as a problem and a growth

2.3.3.1 Intercultural adjustment as a problem

Whether viewing intercultural adjustment from the micro-level or macro-level perspective, most previous studies have tended to highlight the negative consequences of cross-cultural movements and endeavoured to look for effective ways to help sojourners with their undesirable and bewildering transitional experiences. The prevailing tendency of regarding intercultural adjustment as a problematic experience is closely associated with the term *culture shock* (Brein and David, 1971; Church, 1982). Hall (1959) defined *culture shock* as 'a removal or distortion of many of the familiar cues on encounters at home and the substitution for them of other cues which are strange'. Researchers explored the term with a main, if not exclusive, emphasis on people's dispiriting responses to the loss of familiar reinforcement of the home culture and to the confusing and strange signs of the new culture, and measured it by means of psychological indicators (Kim, 2001).

However, it was Oberg (1960) who made the most contributions to the extensive recognition of *culture shock*. He defines it as the 'anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse' (p.177). It was conceptualised as an 'occupational disease' (p.177) suffered by sojourners who suddenly move into another culture and face anxieties as a result of 'the loss of perceptual reinforcement from one's own culture, new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences' (Adler, 1975, p.13). According to Oberg (1960), the signs may be customs, gestures or words that are beyond individuals' conscious level and cover various aspects of daily life, such as when to shake hands, what to say when meeting people and how to give orders to servants. Similar to any other diseases, anxious emotions arising out of culture shock manifest themselves through different negative symptoms: excessive washing of the hands, a feeling of helplessness, a dependence on one's nationals and a terrible longing to be back home, and so on. Furthermore, Oberg divides culture shock into four stages that are experienced by different persons to various degrees:

- Stage 1 – *Honeymoon stage*. During the first few weeks of the sojourn, most people are fascinated by the new environment and are full of enthusiasm and elation. The length of this stage, however, varies from person to person, ranging from a few days to six months.
- Stage 2 is a period of crisis because of genuine difficulties that individuals encounter in their day-to-day life in a new culture. Examples of these difficulties are language and communication problems, unfamiliar transportations and unpleasant food. Hostility, frustration, anxiety and a desire to withdraw begin to be apparent.
- Stage 3 – *Recovery stage*. In this stage, sojourners start to understand some of the cues of the new culture and to some extent have improved their ability to deal with the problems of daily life.
- Stage 4 is characterised by a full recovery and adjustment. During this process, negative feelings are almost gone and new cues are not only accepted and learned, but also appreciated.

Following Oberg (1960), many researchers have further studied and enriched the concept of culture shock in different ways. Smalley (1963), for instance, proposes that culture shock contains four phases: fascination, hostility, improved adjustment and biculturalism. Later, Richardson (1974) re-termed the four stages as elation, depression, recovery and acculturation. Taft (1977, cited in Yue and Le, 2012, p.134) puts forward six aspects of culture shock that are widely acknowledged in the literature:

- Strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaption;
- A sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions;
- Being rejected by and/or rejecting members of the new culture;
- Confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self-identity;

- Surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences; and
- Feelings of importance due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

Some researchers extended the scope of culture shock by using new terminologies and probing other related phenomenon. Arguing that language is the medium of verbal communication, Smalley (1963) raises the issue of *language shock* and considers it to be the fundamental factor of culture shock. Likewise, Church (1982) supports language shock by maintaining that 'it is in the language domain where many of the cues to social relations lie' (p. 540). In addition to communication and social relations, language is viewed as an integral element of culture by Fan (2010), whose model (Figure 2.9) illustrates the interrelated relationships between culture shock and language shock when a person moves from their culture of origin to an alien culture. Fan claims that characteristics of one culture have considerable influence on the language spoken in this culture. Nevertheless, language is able to exert a great impact on the culture where it is embedded. When moving from their own culture to another, an individual might experience both culture and language shock.

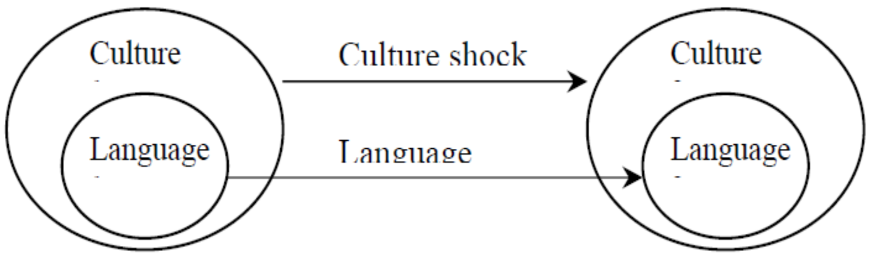


Figure 2.9: Culture and language shock by Fan (2010, p.43)

Guthrie (1966) employs the term *culture fatigue* to describe Peace Corps Volunteers' adverse symptoms in the Philippines, such as depression, irritability and insomnia resulting from the small yet continuing effort required for intercultural adjustment. Although related to each other, culture fatigue differs from culture shock because it is less severe yet more enduring, and underlines a constant effort to accommodate everyday life in a new culture (Zapf, 1991). According to Jones (1973), cultural fatigue is 'a type of mental exhaustion' (p. 30) usually occurring near the end of the fieldwork. After a long period of immersing himself in the research site with many conscious role-playing efforts to build up good relationships with the participants being studied, Jones finally realised his own cultural fatigue and reflected that:

> At that time I found myself reacting to situations much more aggressively than I had earlier in the fieldwork. I was edgy, irritable, and even resentful against the villagers. Not only was I feeling these emotions but I also began to express them in my relationships in the village. My actions were very disturbing to me... (p.30)

Having carried out a study with American technical assistants, Byrnes (1966) reported on the *role shock* of participants, who frequently suffered severe frustration and stress during their overseas assignment. Role shock was usually generated due to professional role ambiguity, unpleasant interpersonal relationships with host nationals, problems of communication and participation in the local hierarchy, and the complicated administrative context of the project. Also different from culture shock, role shock is usually more acute and longer lasting, increases over time but often peaks in the middle of the sojourn, and is hardly to be fully got rid of (Brein and David, 1971).

In spite of the wide recognition and sequent enrichment of culture shock, Berry (1997) advocates the usage of an alternative term, *acculturative stress,* for three reasons. First, acculturative stress has a more solid theoretical foundation, for it has a close relationship with the psychological model of stress. Stress is regarded as a type of reaction to stressors that, in the case of intercultural adjustment, results from the sojourners' intercultural transition. In addition, 'shock' only indicates undesirable experiences and unsuccessful outcomes. However, in reality, sojourners could alleviate or even address the difficulties by using various coping strategies. Moreover, it is actually the intercultural process, rather than culture itself, that leads to problems.

Gaw (2000) surveyed the return-home experience of 66 American undergraduates who had studied overseas earlier. The concept of *reverse culture shock* was put forward as 'the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one's own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time' (Gaw, 2000, pp.83-84). It was investigated in relation to three variables: students' self-reported problem severity; willingness to visit a counsellor for help; and student support service usage. It was found that returnees going through higher levels of reverse culture shock tended to have more problems during their adjustment to the home country. Meanwhile, they less frequently made use of student support services. However, no statistically significant connection was identified between the strength of reverse culture shock and returnees' willingness to turn to professional counsellors.

Focusing on students in particular, Griffiths et al. (2004) propose *learning shock* and define it as the 'experiences of acute frustration, confusion and anxiety' (p.276) encountered by many adult students because of their unfamiliarity with learning and teaching methods and the appearance of 'unexpected and disorienting cues' (p.277) when they return to study. Conducted with MBA students at a UK university, the study revealed that only 17 (12%) of the participants experienced learning shock. Twelve were home students and only five were overseas students studying EFL. As a result, the researchers suggest that learning shock is a phenomenon distinct from culture shock, although related, as it appears not only among home students but also among learners from overseas.

Most studies discussed above emphasise the negative symptoms of culture shock (and of its related phenomena), as well as the problematic and stressful experiences of sojourners during their intercultural adjustment. As Kenneth (1971) claims, culture shock, as a common phenomenon, characterises sojourners' cross-cultural transition, and its intensity largely depends on the size of culture distance – the larger the differences, the more severe the culture shock. Nevertheless, there are many researchers who remain dubious about the disorienting nature of culture shock. For instance, with the objective of examining how a group of international students experienced and adjusted to a new cultural, academic and social setting, Lewthwaite (1996) surveyed and interviewed 12 postgraduates in New Zealand. Even though students reported a high level of frustration, misunderstanding and adaptive difficulties due to the great culture distance, their overall self-reported culture shock and psychological disturbance were not as severe as expected. It seemed that individuals in intercultural transitions were able, to varying extents, to cope with their stress accompanied by culture shock. Therefore, it is better to view that sojourners are capable of 'proactively responding to and resolving problems stemming from change, rather than being passive victims of trauma stemming from a noxious event' (Zhou et al., 2008, p.65).

2.3.3.2 Intercultural adjustment as a growth

In sharp contrast to the tendency to view the process of adjusting to a new culture as a problem, some researchers paid attention to the intercultural learning and personal growth brought about by the same process.

Unlike Oberg (1960), Adler (1975) esteemed intercultural adaptation in a more positive light as a transitional experience, along with 'a movement from a stage of low self- and cultural awareness to a state of high self- and cultural awareness' (p.15). He separated sojourners' adaptation process into five stages:

- *Contact*. Similar to the 'honeymoon stage' described by Oberg (1960), individuals in this initial phase are obsessed with fresh experiences in the new environment and therefore have excitement and euphoria. Nevertheless, they focus more on cultural similarities than differences, which are perceptually deselected.
- *Disintegration.* This stage is characterised by tension, bewilderment, frustration, isolation and withdrawal, because sojourners' ethnocentrism is gradually replaced by clashes between the home and host cultures, where cultural distinction and skills deficit become salient.
- *Reintegration.* This stage is marked by a strong rejection of the new culture, hostility to the new experiences and avoidance of contact with host nationals, as well as reliance on and preference of relationships with people from the same culture. There might be a point of existential choice – whether to regress to the *contact* stage or move forward to the resolution of difficulties and negative feelings.

- *Autonomy.* This stage is marked by an increasing sensitivity, the acquisition of coping skills and a greater understanding of the new culture, the ability to fulfill the role fully and a sense of confidence (maybe overestimated) in new skills attained.
- *Interdependence.* This stage is characterised by the full capability of accepting and celebrating both cultural differences and similarities. Sojourners become expressive, humorous, sensitive and trusting. More importantly, they are so independent as to be readier to experience further transitions in life and to find new ways to explore human diversity.

Although sharing some similarities with earlier understandings of cross-cultural transition and intercultural adjustment, Adler's (1975) conceptualisation of intercultural experiences highlights self-actualisation and personal growth from being aware of only a single reality to accepting multiple realities, from being dependent on familiar cues of home culture to being independent, from being completely monocultural to intercultural. It is worth clarifying that self-actualisation and personal growth are not an inevitable process for every sojourner, because there are many examples of failure, withdrawal and collapse, as well as instances of personal changes that are too superficial to result in self-development (Adler, 1981; Lewthwaite, 1996).

In addition to noticing that culture fatigue is a necessary result of the continuing and demanding efforts required to function effectively in a new culture, Grove and Torbiorn (1985) claim that intercultural adjustment can be effective only under the condition of the emergence of culture fatigue. Otherwise, 'intercultural learning cannot occur to any significant extent in the absence of a partial breakdown of mental frame of reference that originally was constructed in one's own culture' (ibid., p.217). Murphy-Lejeune (2003, p.113) regards intercultural experience and overseas study as a 'maturing process' leading to discovery, an opening of individuals' potential universe and a shaping of their future development.

Similarly, Gill (2007) describes a threefold 'stress-adaptation-growth' path undergone by a cohort of ten Chinese postgraduates in UK universities. To be specific, all participants had encountered challenges and stress stemming from the demands of fitting into the new UK academic environment, which is significantly different from the Chinese academic environment. Examples could be a lack of critical thinking skills, insufficient language proficiency and consequent self-doubt. Beyond merely responding passively, participants strived to adapt to the new educational and socio-cultural environment through a number of approaches, such as nurturing a positive and open attitude to their experiences in the United Kingdom, intrinsically motivating themselves to undertake personal growth, and actively taking part in academic and cultural practices. During this process, good interpersonal relationships with others (i.e., helpful academic staff) made a great contribution to facilitating intercultural adaptation. Ultimately, all the participants sensed independence and autonomy, which were argued to be fundamental aspects of personal growth. After the identification of the three-stage process, Gill (2007) suggested that:

> Intercultural adaptation is in itself a process of intercultural learning, which has the potential to bring about profound changes in overseas students themselves, transforming their understanding of the learning experience, self-knowledge, awareness of the other, and values and worldview. (p. 167)

Based on what has been presented in sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3, it seems reasonable to conclude that intercultural adjustment, either at the micro- or macro- level, is not only demanding to bring about challenges, but also constructive in generating personal growth. Although sojourners suffer from many difficulties in the face of an unfamiliar cultural setting, they also obtain new knowledge and culturally appropriate skills through coping with those problems. As a result, it might be better to view intercultural adjustment as a 'double-edged process, one that is simultaneously troublesome and enriching' (Kim, 2001, p.21).

2.3.4 Intercultural adjustment as a process

> Adaptation is a consequence of an ongoing process in which a system strives to adjust and readjust itself to challenges, changes, and irritants in the environment. The (adjustment) cycle is triggered when discrepancies between the demands of an environment and the capabilities of a system emerge, creating disequilibrium, or stress. (Ruben, 1983, p.137)

2.3.4.1 U-curve hypothesis

A number of studies in the existing literature imply that the overall intercultural adjustment that sojourners undergo is a process of time, consisting of several temporal yet foreseeable sub-patterns. Lysgaard (1955), based on interviews with 200 Norwegians with study experiences in America, first described the curvilinear diagram of intercultural adjustment or wellbeing that was observed to follow a U-shaped curve in relation to the duration. To be specific, there is a sense of excitement and elation at the beginning of a sojourn, because of the new surroundings in the host country; then feelings of confusion and depression follow and make the intercultural adjustment even tougher; finally, individuals learn to overcome the adjustment difficulties and benefit from positive personal changes. Cross-cultural adaption was tested by items concerning professional-educational matters and personal-social matters and linked to three different lengths of previous stay in the United States (0–6 mouths, 6–18 mouths and more than 18 months). It turned out that participants in the first and third group were better accustomed to the American culture than those in the second group. Unfortunately, Lysgaard provided no theoretical foundation to explain his findings and did not perform statistical tests to verify the group differences.

In line with the U-curve graph theory, Oberg (1960), in his well-known discussion of culture shock, also divided the process of adjusting to the host culture into four stages, as presented in the previous section. In other early research, the index of the U curve was extended from intercultural adjustment/wellbeing to other related indicators. Examples include sojourners' attitudinal and behavioural changes in the host country (Becker, 1968), the favourability of and attitude toward the host culture (Chang, 1973; Davis, 1971), and any depression experienced and sociocultural skills acquired (Ward et al., 1998), as well as academic morale with an emphasis on the effects of university culture (Selby and Woods, 1966).

Marking a significant development of the U-curve theory, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) proposed a W-curve (UU curve) to suggest that, in addition to an acculturation to the host culture, sojourners actually experience a readjustment to their home country when they return from abroad. Apart from culture shock encountered during their adaptation to an alien social system, individuals usually 'undergo a reacculturation process in their home environment similar to that experienced abroad' (p.39), especially when they have gained some of the sociocultural skills needed to fit in with the host culture (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963). However, there are many variabilities in terms of the degree and duration of the W-curve experienced by different individuals. According to Gullahorn and Gullahorn, two variables are of great value: interaction and sentiment. Given similar attitudes, more similarity in sojourners' perceptions (e.g., cultural similarity, common task, mutually appreciated task-related values and goals) encourage proximity to the host culture, which will encourage more participation in interaction in the new culture. Furthermore, an increase in interaction frequency, is likely to foster a positive feeling during the intercultural adjustment process.

Attempting to examine the success claimed for the U-curve hypothesis, subsequent researchers found varying degrees of support in different settings. Recruiting 222 Turkish students, Davis (1971) investigated the U curve of favourability toward America by asking participants to consider their experiences in retrospect, after their return from study abroad. The data supported the U-curve pattern by demonstrating that scores on favourability to America decreased to their lowest point for participants staying in the United States for from two to three years, and that this was followed by a peak for those staying from four to five years.

Davis's study was not free from limitations. First of all, no statistical tests were conducted to underpin the identified U-curve pattern. In addition, the sample was chosen for convenience, leading to some restrictions to the generalisation of the claimed pattern. More importantly, the time since participants came back from their sojourn differed markedly, so the extent to which their reflection was accurate and comparable could be questioned. Meanwhile, Davis implicitly assumed that the views that returnees had held when studying abroad remained almost unchanged since the time of their return, although it could be argued that returnees' current attitudes toward the United States might actually have been affected by many events after their return.

Calling for extending research attention beyond cultures akin to those of the United States., Becker (1968) re-examined the U-curve pattern in terms of attitudes to home country and attitudes to America. With a sample of 77 students from Europe (N=25), India (N=27) and Israel (N=25), participants were divided into three groups according to the percentage of their stay in the United States that they had completed. The anticipated U curve was found only among the group of Europeans students, whereas both Indian and Israeli students demonstrated a reverse U pattern.

Chang's (1973) study also lent some support to the U-curve paradigm, through an examination of the intercultural adjustment of 209 Chinese students in the United States. As Lysgaard (1955) suggested, the attitudes of overseas students can be categorised into three stages: the spectator stage, with an initial high level of favourability to the host country; the adjustment stage, when all sorts of challenges lead to a significant drop in the favourable attitude; and the coming-to-terms stage, when students recover from the problems and gradually feel more positive toward the host country again. Inspired by the three-stage hypothesis, Chang divided the sample into three groups based on the length of participants' residence in the United States: three months or less, seven to eight months and 25 months or more. Corresponding to the hypothesis, the results of the chi-square test revealed that there were remarkable differences between the attitudes of Chinese students in the first and second groups. Participants in the initial stage of their sojourn displayed a more favourable attitude to America than their peers who were staying abroad for longer. Nevertheless, no statistically significant attitudinal differences were identified between students in the second and third group, rendering only partial support for the U-curve theory.

Despite varying degrees of support, many researchers are suspicious of the existence of the U-curve pattern. Ward et al. (1998) point out two main disadvantages of earlier studies. First, most relevant studies were cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, so they were deemed to be less appropriate and less able to track the pattern of changes throughout the intercultural adjustment process. In addition, the U-curve was heavily linked to psychological-emotional and attitudinal indicators, leaving other aspects related to intercultural adjustment neglected.

Under the influence of the framework by Searle and Ward (1990), Ward et al. (1998) operationalised intercultural adjustment in terms of *psychological adjustment* and *sociocultural adjustment*. The former concerns sojourners' 'feelings of wellbeing', while the latter is related to their 'ability to "fit in" and negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture' (Searle and Ward, 1990, p.450). Recruiting 35 newly arrived Japanese students in New Zealand, Ward et al. (1998) conducted a longitudinal study, distributing their questionnaire at four different times: within 24 hours of arrival and after four, six and twelve months of stay in New Zealand. Neither the psychological nor the sociocultural adjustment scores supported the shape of a U curve. Instead, it was found that participants exhibited the highest level of sociocultural adjustment problems at the beginning of their sojourn and experienced a dramatic drop in these difficulties over time. Similarly, the time close to the entry into a new culture was connected to the peak of depression, contradictory to Oberg's (1960) description of the 'honeymoon stage' when sojourners are elated by their new environment.

Questioning the possible subjective distortion caused by retrospective data, Nash (1991) emphasises the benefits of investigating intercultural adjustment by comparing experimental and control groups. It was also put forward by Church (1982, p.560) earlier that 'without adequate control groups, it is difficult to attribute sojourn outcomes such as attitude change and personal development to the sojourn itself…'. The research of Nash (1991) included 32 students from the home university in the United States (control group) and 41 cooperating students studying in France (experimental group). A questionnaire was designed to test psychological wellbeing at four different stages of the participants' study, from before the experimental group's departure to Paris to the end of the academic year in France. The results suggested that the wellbeing of cooperating students in France showed no statistically significant difference from that of students at home. Meanwhile, the graph of wellbeing for students in the experimental group presented an approximately flattened-out line with time, providing no support for the popular U curve. The author suggested that this inconsistency with previous related research might be explained by the small sample size.

Arguing that more attention should be placed on the role of international students as students, rather than as foreigners, Selby and Woods (1966) conceptualise intercultural adjustment as the academic morale that students have under the influence of an institutional setting. The results from both interviews and questionnaires indicate that academic morale exhibits a J curve, not a U curve. Without displaying the 'honeymoon stage' proposed by Oberg (1960), overseas students started with a low level of academic morale at the beginning of their sojourn, which might be due to their unfamiliarity with the new learning environment. Later, their academic morale, in general, seemed to be determined by the stage of the academic year and exam grades, with a drop before and during examinations and a rise after passing the exams. The two researchers explored international students' social life as well, discovering that academic morale greatly influenced social morale, whose curve was also in accordance with the stages of academic year. There was a fall in social morale during term time and an increase during the holidays. Although failing to provide support for the U curve, Selby and Wood suggest that the intercultural adjustment of overseas students would be better explored from the perspective of the university setting and its academic demands than through the effects of culture at large.

In light of the diverse levels of support, it seems to be hasty to conclude that the U curve of sojourners' adjustment to a new culture is applicable to all contexts. Church (1982) comments that 'support for the U-curve hypothesis must be considered weak, inconclusive and overgeneralized' (p.542). In addition to the methodological weakness of previous studies, such as a lack of longitudinal research, heavy reliance on retrospective data and an overemphasis on psychological wellbeing measurements as indicators of intercultural adjustment, Black and Mendendall (1991) further point out the impact of individual differences:

> Individual differences would cause the amplitude of the honeymoon effect or culture shock to be different and also would cause these stages to occur at different points in time. Thus, even if all individuals experienced a U-curve pattern of adjustment, the different shapes of the curve would then dilute and perhaps hide an aggregate U-curve pattern when adjustment measures were averaged at specific points in time. (p. 242)

Although it is important to have a good knowledge of the U curve to facilitate intercultural adjustment, it is of greater importance to understand the context and causes that make the pattern more or less applicable (Nash, 1991).

2.3.4.2 Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory

There is a general consensus among researchers and intercultural trainers that sojourners face the great challenges in the course of their adaptation to new cultures, but the underlying reasons and the nature of these challenges remain controversial (Gao and Gudykunst, 1990; Hullett and Witte, 2001). Gudykunst and Hammer (1988) initially proposed that 'sojourners, immigrants, tourists, and other travelers are strangers when they enter a host culture for the first time' (p. 108) (Assumption 1) and that the difficulties that individuals encounter in adapting to new cultural environments are because they are 'not cognitively sure of how to behave (they have uncertainty) and they experience the feeling of a lack of security (anxiety)' (p.108) (Assumption 2). Therefore, the two researchers came up with Anxiety/Uncertainty theory (AUM), postulating that a reduction in uncertainty and/or anxiety provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for effective intercultural adjustment (Assumption 3).

The communication-based AUM theory is an incorporation of the uncertainty reduction theory proposed by Berger and Calabrese (1975) to explain communicating behaviours and the anxiety framework of Stephen and Stephen (1985). According to Berger and Calabrese (1975), *uncertainty reduction* refers to the ability to anticipate accurately and explain the behaviour of others. In other words, it 'involves the creation of proactive predictions and retroactive explanations about the behaviour of others' (Gudykunst and Hammer, 1988, p.106). Three communicating situations will stimulate an individual to decrease their uncertainty about the person whom they talk to: when conversational counterparts can satisfy some need or provide reward, or when future communications with them are foreseen and when they take no deviant behaviours (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). Besides, uncertainty reduction is a process developing over time and more interactions, rather than being confined to initial communication (Witte, 1993). When it comes to *anxiety*, Stephen and Stephen (1985) state that this is the negative feelings resulting from 'the anticipation of negative consequences' (p.159) before individuals interact with others from a different culture, and the negative consequences include 'negative psychological or behavioural consequences for the self and negative evaluations by members of the outgroup and the ingroup' (p.159).

Combing uncertainty reduction with anxiety reduction processes, Gudykunst and Hammer (1988) put forward AUM and related it specifically to intercultural adaptation. Within the intercultural adjustment context, *uncertainty reduction*, as a cognitive process, is defined as 'the ability of individuals to predict and explain their own behaviour and that of others during interactions', while *anxiety*, as an affective construct, is referred as 'the fear of negative consequences in a "foreign" cultural environment' (p.112). *Attributional confidence*, the reverse of uncertainty, may be understood as the confidence of an individual in their ability to predict how others will act and to explain why they do so (Witte, 1993). Assumptions 3 and 4 in Gudykunst and Hammer's (1988) pioneering work attract most of the research attention. In Assumption 3, uncertainty reduction (or attributional confidence) and anxiety reduction are viewed as two independent constructs that directly exert an influence on intercultural adaptation. Nevertheless, the combination of the two constructs was also postulated to provide 'necessary and sufficient conditions for intercultural adaptation' (p.109) (Assumption 4).

The work of Gudykunst and Hammer is under the influence of Lieberson (1985, cited in Gudykunst and Hammer, 1988), who views variables with causal relationships with the dependent variable as the 'basic' causes. However, variables having indirect effects on the dependent variables are the 'superficial' or 'surface' causes. In the AUM theory framework, uncertainty and anxiety reduction were deemed to be the two basic causes of intercultural adaption. Meanwhile, 16 other variables were discussed because of their indirect effects mediated by uncertainty and anxiety reduction. That is to say, although the 16 variables are surface (or superficial) causes of intercultural adjustment, they can be considered as the basic causes of reduced uncertainty and anxiety.

The impacts of uncertainty and anxiety reduction on intercultural adjustment are regarded as *assumptions* that are untested yet testable. In the initial formulation of the AUM theory, *axioms* were stated to describe the relationships between uncertainty and anxiety reduction and their basic causes (referred to as 'primary variables') (Gudykunst and Hammer, 1988, p.112). In total, 16 primary variables were selected from the literature. Among them, eight were found to be associated with both reduced uncertainty and anxiety (knowledge of host culture, shared networks, intergroup attitudes, favourable contact, stereotypes, cultural identity, cultural similarity and second-language competence); four were correlated only with uncertainty reduction (intimacy, attraction, display of nonverbal affiliative expressiveness and the use of appropriate uncertainty reduction strategies); and four were related only to anxiety reduction (the motivation of strangers to live permanently in the host culture, attitudes of host nationals, intergroup host culture policy toward strangers and psychological differentiation of strangers). In addition to the axioms, Gudykunst and Hammer also generated *theorems* from the axioms to delineate the relationships between different primary variables. The schematic model of their AUM theory is presented Figure 2.10.

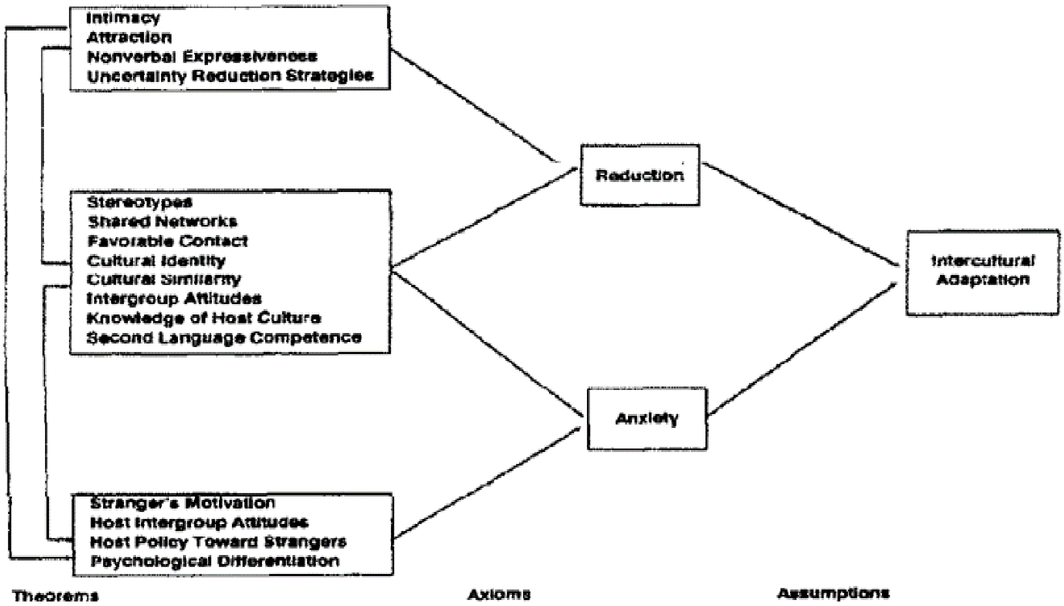


Figure 2.10: Schematic model of AUM theory by Gudykunst and Hammer (1988, p.114)

After the proposal of AUM theory, many studies have been conducted to test the proposed axioms and theorems empirically in the intercultural adaption context. Arguing that it is not practical to include all the primary variables in one study, Gao and Gudykunst (1990) instead tested Assumptions 3 and 4 (Gudykunst and Hammer, 1988) by isolating six variables: intercultural adaptation, uncertainty reduction (attributional confidence), anxiety reduction, cultural similarity, social contact and cultural knowledge. A group of 121 volunteers from different academic departments at a large urban American university were recruited. From the basic model of Gudykunst and Hammer, they proposed a more sophisticated model including two changes: a) direct paths from the three involved primary variables (cultural similarity, social contact and cultural knowledge) to intercultural adaptation were added; b) the interactions between uncertainty and anxiety reduction were assumed. The findings supported Gudykunst and Hammer's assumptions; that is, although the three primary variables affected the adaptation outcome, their influences were significant only through the mediation of reducing uncertainty and anxiety. Thus, the proposed direct paths from primary variables to intercultural adjustment failed to be confirmed. Uncertainty reduction alone, however, had predictive power for the self-reflected outcome of intercultural adjustment, but anxiety reduction did not. At the same time, the second proposed path was not proved either, indicating that the reductions of uncertainty and anxiety were two independent rather than correlated processes.

Aiming to revise AUM theory, Hammer et al. (1998) grouped nine of the primary variables discussed in the work of Gudykunst and Hammer (1988) into four categories: interpersonal saliences, intergroup saliences, communication message exchange and host contact conditions. The associated variables with each factor are presented in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4: Four grouped factors of AUM theory and their associated variables in the research of Hammer et al. (1998)

Factors	Variables
Interpersonal Saliences	Intimacy; Attraction
Intergroup Saliences	Cultural Identity; Knowledge of Host Culture; Culture Similarity
Communication Message Exchange	Information Gathering Strategies (passive media strategies, Interactive/Interrogation strategies, and Interactive/self-disclosure strategies); Language Proficiency
Host Contact Conditions	Host Attitudes toward Sojourners; Favourable Contact

The four identified underlying factors were investigated in relation to uncertainty reduction and anxiety reduction. Moreover, the issue as to whether the two 'basic' causes of intercultural adjustment are independent of each other was re-examined. In contrast to the study of Gudykunst and Hammer (1988), in which adjustment was conceptualised as 'the fit between individuals and their environment' (p.111), Hammer and his colleagues regarded intercultural adjustment as people's attitudinal satisfaction about their sojourn. Similar to the work of Gao and Gudykunst (1990), this research was conducted in a US setting involving a total of 291 international students from two different American universities. In general, the study offered some, if not complete, support for AUM theory. In particular, the mediating role played by uncertainty and anxiety reduction between the nine primary variables under investigation and the satisfaction (the outcome indicator of intercultural adjustment) was verified. The findings also revealed that uncertainty and anxiety reduction were two interrelated dimensions of intercultural adjustment, in conflict with the assumption made by Gudykunst and Hammer (1988) and the results of Gao and Gudykunst (1990). Yet these findings were in line with earlier research by Lazarus (1982) in which the cognitive process was related to affective process, in that thoughts were argued to be able to 'generate, influence, and shape the emotional response in every species that reacts with emotion' (p.1019).

Emphasising the practical value of AUM theory, Gudykunst (1998) applied it to intercultural adjustment training. He claimed that intercultural adjustment would not be effective if the level of uncertainty and anxiety experienced by individuals was either too high or too low. High uncertainty leads to an inability to predict and understand hosts' behaviours accurately, while high anxiety may lead individuals to avoid interacting with hosts and host cultures. Nevertheless, if uncertainty is too low, sojourners are likely to be too confident to predict and interpret hosts' behaviours, and if anxiety is too low they may avoid communicating with hosts through lack of motivation. In this case, the aim of courses should be to manage an appropriate level of uncertainty and anxiety in trainees. Gudykunst and Kim (1992) echo that there is a critical point of uncertainty and anxiety beyond which there is little effective intercultural adjustment. According to Gudykunst (1998), being mindful encourages trainees to create new and more specific categories to which predictions and explanations of hosts' behaviours are referred, to be open to new information, and to be aware and accepting of alternative perspectives (e.g. hosts' perspectives) for effective interaction, other than those first coming to mind.

Attempting to provide a method to determine the critical point of uncertainty and anxiety and find when to expect intercultural adaptation, Witte (1993) compared AUM theory to Leventhal's (1970, cited in Witte, 1993) extended parallel process model (EPPM). EPPM assumes that people perform a separate emotional and cognitive process in reaction to perceived threat. Self-protective behaviours stem from the danger control process, when one attempts to control the perceived danger, whereas maladaptation is when one attempts to control the fear.

Witte (1992) further explains that whether the danger control process or the fear control process dominates, there are two main constructs: *perceived treat,* that is, an emotional response, and *perceived self-efficacy*. In his later work, *perceived self-efficacy* is defined as 'how well one can predict what will happen if a certain behavior is performed… as well as one's belief in his or her ability to perform a certain behavior to achieve a certain outcome' (Witte, 1993, p.205). When individuals cognitively perceive a higher level of threat while a lower level of self-efficacy to successfully cope with that threat, the fear control process becomes overwhelming. In this case, they tend to concentrate on how to avoid or deny the threat, rather than to seek ways to deal with it. During this process, maladaptive changes tend to happen. By contrast, if the level of perceived self-efficacy exceeds that of perceived threat, the danger control process dominates and motivates individuals to search actively for ways to prevent or deal with the threat. This process, the opposite of the fear control process, is likely to bring about adaptive changes.

Under these circumstances, the critical value of perceived threat and self-efficacy depends on a comparison of these two constructs, yet also varies with the 'study topic, population, or individual differences in the subjects' (Witte, 1993, p. 203). In the context of adjusting to a new culture, Witte (1993) claims that uncertainty reduction (attributional confidence) has commonalities with perceived self-efficacy, and that anxiety is similar, if not identical, to fear. As a result, the parallel process in EPPM is comparable to uncertainty and anxiety reduction in AUM, despite the different domain. Figure 2.11 shows the revised AUM model incorporating the EMMP framework.

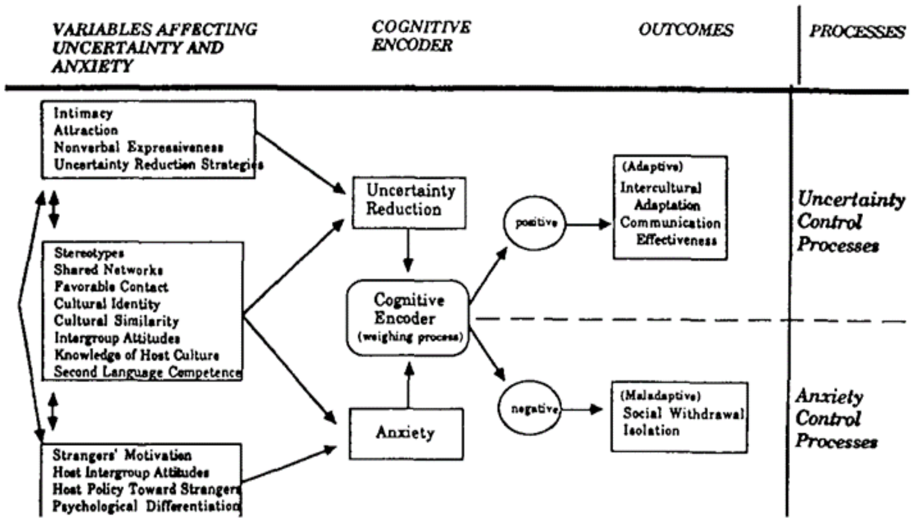


Figure 2.11: Proposed Uncertainty and Anxiety Control Processes in Uncertainty Reduction theory by Witte (1993, p.206)

As presented in Figure 2.11, the outcome of intercultural adjustment is still influenced by uncertainty and anxiety as a whole. Meanwhile, as in Gudykunst and Hammer's (1988) original model, there are a number of primary factors impacting on reducing uncertainty and anxiety. What distinguishes it is the addition of a *cognitive encoder* process during which sojourners, either consciously or unconsciously, weigh their attributional confidence with reference to anxiety. High attributional confidence/low anxiety (positive value) nurtures individuals' confidence so that they believe that they are able to predict and explain what will happen in their interactions with hosts or in adapting to the host culture; hence they are not overwhelmingly anxious. As a result, the uncertainty control process outweighs the anxiety control process and produces desirable intercultural adaptation outcomes. On the other hand, low attributional confidence/high anxiety (negative value) is associated with little effective adaptation and the avoidance of intercultural interactions as a result of the dominant anxiety control process. Unfortunately, no data or methodological analysis were conducted by Witte (1993), so the model requires further empirical investigation.

In a later study, Hullett and Witte (2001) tested the application of EPPM to AUM by virtue of the analysis of secondary data collected from 121 international students in America. Two hypotheses were made in advance: an uncertainty control process, as a result of attributional confidence surpassing anxiety, led to more adaptation and less isolation; and vice versa. Participants were divided into two groups according to their critical values (calculated by a proposed formula). Those with positive critical values belonged to the uncertainty control group, whereas those with negative critical values were allocated to the anxiety control group. The results reinforced Witte's (1993) framework that participants from the uncertainty control group revealed more confidence and comfort in their interactions with Americans, thus they had more frequent communications with hosts and attained a more pleasant level of intercultural adjustment. Conversely, those from another group felt isolated from Americans rather than adapting to the host culture, and also reported a greater number of social contacts with people from the same country.

The AUM theory resembles the 'equilibrium' (p.296) model whereby an inherent homeostatic mechanism is hypothesised in human beings (Anderson, 1994). The mechanical system enables people to operate in equilibrium until any dramatic life changes compel them to switch the 'steady state' mode to a more dynamic and cyclical operation for the achievement of a balance again. When individuals enter a new cultural environment, the cultural differences that they encounter cause various degrees of uncertainty and anxiety, but the homeostatic mechanism pushes them to escape normal operating mode and find ways to attain a new equilibrium by reducing psychological disturbance. In this sense, intercultural adaptation can be understood as a dynamic process of pursuing internal balance experienced by individuals moving into foreign cultures. However, AUM is more than the 'equilibrium' model in that, apart from reducing psychological disruption, it recognises the integral role of a cognitive process (i.e., assessing threat and reducing uncertainty) in sojourners' intercultural adjustments. On the other hand, 'equilibrium' models, as Anderson (1994) argues, are 'reductionist and tend to be one dimensional: the individual appears to adapt more to internal tension or dissonance than to external environment' (p.296).

Nevertheless, the AUM theory also has shortcomings, one of which is that it fails to cover many aspects of international adaptation that individuals would experience. For instance, other than making efforts to decrease stress and to communicate effectively with hosts, sojourners may also acquire some knowledge about the values and appropriate behaviours of the host culture. Some sojourners probably even treat internal tension in the quest of intercultural adjustment as a source of motivation.

2.3.4.3 Other theories taking intercultural adjustment as a process

There are groups of researchers standing for other theories that are focused on the process of adjusting to an alien culture. However, there are only nuances among these theories. The recuperation model, as discussed by Anderson (1994, p.293), is always associated with a recovery from *culture shock*. An example of this model is the famous U-curve theory presented in an earlier section, delineating the 'high-bottom-high' pattern of psychological states that sojourners may experience in the face of culture shock. Moreover, the recuperation is not confined to a recovery from cultural shock as an 'occupational disease' (Oberg, 1960, p.177), but also involves fundamental personal growth after success in adapting to a new culture. Adler's (1975, 1981) theory is an example of this personal growth. He argues that *disintegration*, a dramatic shake of personality resulting from cross-cultural experiences, provides premises and impetus for a new enhanced self. Nevertheless, neither is the recuperation model free from critique, mostly focused on the role of culture shock. For example, Change (1985) argues that it is over-generalising and misleading to assume that the phenomenon of culture shock is universal, regardless of the enormous variety of contexts. Other investigators query whether sojourners' unpleasant cross-cultural experiences are only due to the effects of culture or might be attributed to other reasons, such as a major living environment change (Anderson, 1994; Berry, 1997; Gu, 2009).

Another school of researchers views intercultural adjustment as a learning process. In order to adapt, sojourners need to obtain a great number of cultural knowledge to interpret accurately the receiving culture and social skills to behave in it appropriately (Yue and Le, 2012). This combination of perceptual and behavioural learning during the process of adjusting to a foreign culture is connected with Social Learning Theory (SLT), which has its roots in cognitive and behavioural theories (Anderson, 1994). Albert Bandura (1977), one of the most famous pioneers of SLT, claims that people not only learn from the consequences of their own behaviours, but also from observing others' behaviour and the results. If appreciating certain behaviours and the associated results, individuals will initiate imitations of these behaviours either to prevent punishment or earn rewards. According to Bandura (1977), there are four main components of SLT:

- *Attention.* Before imitation takes place, individuals should, in the first place, be aware of certain behaviours by the role model that they admire and then pay close attention to them. Several factors may be able to influence individuals' attention, such as the status of the role model, the availability of the role model and how attractive the role model appears (Black and Mendenhall, 1990).
- *Retention.* During this process, individuals will cognitively encode into memory the modelled behaviour that they have observed, which will provide guidance for their later imitations. Recurring observations will help mentally to rehearse the modelled behaviour and will therefore reinforce the cognitive code that they have created.
- *Reproduction.* At this stage, individuals will turn the encoded modelled behaviour from their memory into real practice. They will also refer their performance back to their memory, and this comparing process may lead to the manifestation of differences between what has been observed in the role model and what has been actually acted out by the observers.
- *Incentives and motivational process.* This last element of SLT is of great importance because of its effects on many aspects throughout the learning process. For instance, incentives or motivation can influence which role model is selected, how much attention is given to observation or how much effort is made to act on the encoded behaviour. The motivational process of learning contains two kinds of expectations. The first is termed *efficacy expectations*, 'the degree to which the individual believes he or she can successfully execute a particular behavior' (Black and Mendenhall, 1990, p.234). To some extent, it resembles the *uncertainty reduction* proposed by Gudykunst and Hammer (1988) in their AUM theory.

> Bandura (1977) further claims that the higher the level of efficacy expectations, the greater the effort that individuals are willing to make in imitating and executing the modelled behaviour. Another type of expectations is *outcome expectations,* referring to 'people's belief that execution of certain behaviors will lead to the desired outcome' (Black and Mendenhall, 1990, p.235). Bandura (1977) mentions that individuals may observe and cognitively transfer many behaviours, but they are more likely to be motivated to carry out just those that are associated with positive rewards.

In support of the view that sojourners striving to adjust to the host culture are also engaged in a learning process, Black and Mendenhall (1990) re-investigated the U-curve theory on the basis of SLT. They explain that the emergence of the honeymoon stage (also the initial stage of the U-curve pattern) results from individuals' focus on aspects that are similar in the home and host cultures. However, the effects of cultural differences gradually pervade with time, thus individuals are likely to display numerous inappropriate behaviours in and inaccurate interpretations of the host culture. Undesired consequences and negative feedback therefore occur, which will highly possibly lead to culture shock if accumulating to a certain high ratio. Greater cultural differences are likely to make role models less attractive. As a result, individuals tend to have less interest in noticing modelled behaviours, pay less attention to their observations, retain less accurate versions in their mind and ultimately make fewer efforts to reproduce the observed behaviours in reality. However, a longer time in the host culture makes a sufficient number of observations of the appropriate behaviour possible, especially when the role model is repeatedly available. Several high-quality reproductions of the modelled behaviour bring more rewarding results and positive feedback. Ultimately, the acquirement of the ability to execute appropriate actions in the host culture signifies the advent of the adjustment phase.

On the basis of a gap-theoretic approach, Ady (1995) defines sojourner adjustment as 'a function of the extent to which the sojourner judges he or she is meeting environment demands and the extent to which the sojourner judges that their needs are being met in the new environment' (p.108). The narrower the two additive gaps, the more adapted the sojourners tend to be. In addition, sojourner adjustment is viewed as a multidimensional concept consisting of many discrete domains of life. Some examples of the domains include family life, work, competence, friendship and so on. However, the extent of an individual's adjustment is hardly the same in relation to each domain and over time. In this case, an individual in a new culture will not accommodate every single unfamiliar aspect that they encounter equally. Moreover, domains may interact with each other over time, which, in turn, can have a greater effect on the adaptation to a novel environment. For instance, if an individual is more competent in the domain of host language proficiency, they are more likely to communicate effectively with hosts (the domain of interaction with hosts) and therefore their adjustment process is facilitated. In conclusion, sojourners' adjustment process over time depends on their evaluations of gaps, in terms of various specific domains, between their own capabilities and the requirements of the new environment, and between their needs and the fulfillment provided by the new environment.

Also regarding cross-cultural adaptation as a multifaceted concept, Kim (1995) proposes that individuals' adjustment to the host culture is a complicated and dynamic process following the stress-adaptation-growth path in general. The broad term *stranger* was put forward to cover other more specific terms such as immigrants, refugees and sojourners. Kim (1995) further suggests that people could only be considered as *strangers* on the premise of three conditions:

> The strangers must have had a primary socialization in one culture (or subculture) and have moved into a different and unfamiliar culture (or subculture); b) the strangers are at least minimally dependent on the host environment for meeting their personal and social needs; and c) the strangers are engaged in continuous, first-hand communication experiences with that environment. (Kim, 1995, p.175)

When entering a new culture, strangers experience loss of familiar and internalised home cultural signs (*deculturation*), face unfamiliar cultural elements and have to acquire effective ways to handle those new situations (*acculturation*). Within the processes of acculturation and deculturation, the part of sojourners' internal frame of reference moulded by the home culture suffers from degrees of changes that may cause a temporary disequilibrium, apparent in a form of counterproductive psychological reaction such as uncertainty, bewilderment or anxiety. Such unpleasant experiences are referred to as *stress,* stemming from sojourners' lack of ability to meet the demands of the new environment. Nevertheless, sojourners under stress will strive for defence by activating an inherent self-protective mechanism to maintain internal balance and minimise the 'anticipated or actual pain of disequilibrium' (Kim, 2004, p.341). Other than some negative responses to the challenges, such as avoiding interaction with hosts, holding hostile attitudes to the host culture or even withdrawing, there is another way of managing the stress – adaptation – by which individuals 'sooner or later learn to deal with the impending cross-cultural challenges and, in time, work to improve their functional relationship with the host environment' (ibid.). Following the stages of stress and adaptation are internal changes and growth resulting from sojourners' acquisition of ability to cope effectively with challenges in new cultural situations. The proposed stress-adaptation-growth path of intercultural adjustment will be neither linear nor smooth over time; rather, it draws back when sojourners are trapped by new stresses and moves forward again when they break through.

2.3.5 Identified gaps and associated research questions

In sections 2.3.2, 2.3.3 and 2.3.4, the concept of intercultural adjustment has been reviewed through the lens of sojourners' experiences. To unfold how it has been variously understood in the literature, the complex nature of intercultural adjustment was presented from three perspectives: as both a group- and an individual-level phenomenon; as having both constructive and destructive effects on sojourners; and as a process fluctuating with the increasing duration of sojourners' stay in the host country. Zooming in on each specific perspective, it may be seen that the interpretations of intercultural adjustment are also diverse. Despite the diversity, the existing literature on intercultural adjustment displays a few common insufficiencies that direct the formulation of some research questions of this study.

In the first place, most existing studies examine intercultural adjustment mainly, if not exclusively, by linking it to a psychological state or attitudinal behaviour. For international students, learning or academic experience in the host country is especially vital and this is the integral part of their intercultural adjustment process (e.g., Gu et al., 2010; Tian and Lowe,2009; Zhou and Todman, 2008). Under these circumstances, it is sensible to build a tentative connection between international students' intercultural adjustment to the host country and the quality of HE service that they have experienced in the host university. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, this connection is barely examined in the current literature. To bridge the identified gap, the following research question is proposed in the context of this research:

6. Is there any statistically significant relationship between international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by their university and their perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom?

Although the procedural nature of sojourners' intercultural adjustment has been addressed in the literature, the changing pattern of its process with time has not been proved universal, and is subject to different contexts and different choices of indicators. For example, the research findings concerning the U curve proposed by Lysgaard (1955) are mixed, reaching no agreement on its existence and applicability. In the current research, Chinese international students' intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom is tentatively related to the quality of UK HE service, which is an innovative yet under-investigated context. Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine the shape of changing pattern of intercultural adjustment in this particular context. The results of this research are believed to contribute to the literature on both service quality and intercultural adjustment. Accordingly, the following research question is formulated:

7. What is the change pattern (if any) in international the students' perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom, with them accumulating participating participation experiences of participation in UK HE over time?

Third, the prevalent investigation of intercultural adjustment in the literature is by quantitative methods (e.g., questionnaires), giving a limited depth of information, or by probing into only sojourners' (e.g., international students') perceptions, giving a limited breadth of opinions. This study, by contrast, includes open questions to explore the factors influencing the adjustment of Chinese students to the United Kingdom, as well as to discover how the university could facilitate that process. Moreover, answers are solicited not only from Chinese international students themselves, but also from the academic staff at UK universities. Accordingly, the following two research questions are proposed:

8. From the perspectives of Chinese international students and academic staff, how is intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom be affected?

9. From the perspectives of Chinese international students and academic staff, how can intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom be facilitated by universities in the United Kingdom?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the methodological issues of the current study. To demonstrate how the research design for this study was developed, this chapter is based on a sub-structure informed by Crotty's (1998) model. According to Crotty, a researcher needs to consider four major levels for developing a research design: research paradigm, theoretical lens, methodological approach and methods of data collection. Within the context of this research, careful consideration of each of these levels is subsequently presented. The philosophical assumptions of this research are discussed in section 3.2, followed by an exploration of the relationship between existing theories and the research design of this study (section 3.3). Following the guidance of Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), section 3.4 explains in detail the convergent parallel design adopted by this research. The procedure for collecting quantitative and qualitative data is displayed in the last section of this chapter.

3.2 Research paradigm

3.2.1 Philosophical assumptions

As the first level of Crotty's (1998) model, a research paradigm is regarded by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) as the broadest and the most abstract level to guide research design. The original use of the term paradigm can be traced back to Kuhn (1970), referring to a set of shared briefs or values among a community of researchers. Amidst various conceptualisations of paradigms by many researchers, the most prominent work is by Guba and Lincoln (1994), who based the term on three inquiries in sequence: ontological, epistemological and methodological inquiries. Different terms have been adopted as synonyms for paradigm, such as worldview (e.g., Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011), disciplinary matrix (e.g., Kuhn, 2000, cited in Morgan, 2007, p.50) and philosophical assumptions (e.g., Greene, 2008).

The two most conventional research paradigms are positivism, which often informs quantitative research, and constructivism, which is typically associated with qualitative research (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). For more than a century, purists advocating for either paradigm have debated the superiority of the tenets of one side over the other (Greene, 2008; Morgan, 2007). For quantitative purists (e.g., Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998), social science research should be allied with objectivism, free from time and context constraints (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011, p.40) list the doctrines on which positivism is based:

- determinism or cause-and-effect thinking;
- reductionism, by narrowing and focusing on select variables to interrelate;
- detailed observations and measures of variables; and
- the testing of theories that are continually refined.

Nevertheless, qualitative purists (e.g., Guba and Lincoln, 1994) contend that single-objective reality and time- and context-free generalisations – the tenets advocated by positivists— are neither desirable nor possible. On the contrary, they believe that there are many realities subjectively constructed by participants (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Participants' interpretations of the reality tend to be diverse, because they have different personal histories and social interactions with others (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Based on the tripartite structure conception of the term paradigm, Guba and Lincoln (1994) summarise the basic beliefs (Table 3.1) of positivism and constructivism.

Table 3.1： Basic beliefs of positivism and constructivism research paradigms (adapted from Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.109)

Item	Positivism	Constructivism
Ontological beliefs	Naive realism – 'real' reality but apprehensible	Relativism – local and specific constructed realities
Epistemological beliefs	Dualist/objectivist; findings true	Transactional/subjectivist; created findings
Methodology	Experimental/manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods	Hermeneutical/dialectical

My ontological assumptions touch on doctrines from both positivism and constructivism (Scotland, 2012). On the one hand, I believe partially in the existence of a single reality whose existence is independent of the inquirer, while discoverable through research (Cohen et al., 2007). On the other hand, I stand by some of the assumptions from the constructive framework that reality resides in the consciousness of human beings and varies from person to person (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In general, I believe that there is an absolute reality awaiting to be discovered. However, human beings are not able to access that reality directly; we can only approach it by making meaning of our experiences and by gradually accumulating indirect, personally constructed knowledge about it (Hammersley, 1993). My ontological stance is that there are 'multiple perceptions about a single, mind-independent reality' (Krauss, 2005, p.761).

In the context of the current research, HE service quality is taken as a 'reality' subject to how various HE participants and stakeholders perceive it. Crotty (1998) points out that different people might construct different meanings of the same phenomenon. The two groups of participants of this research (i.e., academic staff and Chinese international students) tend to construct their respective HE quality-related perceptions on the basis of their lived and ongoing educational experiences. There are likely to be differences in their subjective constructions of quality, even though they are evaluating the HE offering of the same university. Meanwhile, the degree of intercultural adjustment that Chinese international students have achieved in the United Kingdom is considered as another 'reality'. Again, how individual students evaluate themselves is by no means completely objective, and is often influenced by sets of individual factors, such as their own meaning-making behaviours.

Given the beliefs above, I am apt to use pragmatism as my philosophical assumption, rather than become entangled in the either/or positivism–interpretivism dichotomy. According to Dewey (1948, cited in Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.17), pragmatism indicates that 'in order to discover the meaning of the idea [we must] ask for its consequences'. As a result, pragmatists should be practical and outcome-oriented; choosing the most appropriate research approach, be it qualitative or quantitative, based on the needs for addressing research questions better (ibid.).

3.2.2 My positionality

Whether or not there is an identifiable and stable dividing line between the insider–outsider dichotomy has been the subject of much debate over the years. According to Merton (1972), insiders are 'members of specified groups and collectives, or occupants of specified social statuses' (p.15); by contrast, outsiders are 'non-members'. He also put forward the advantages of being insider researchers, who are believed to have 'monopolistic' or at least 'privileged' (ibid., p.11) access to the knowledge of the particular group under investigation. An extreme argument for being an insider is that a researcher is able to understand a certain group only on the premise that he or she belongs to that group; if not, the researcher is excluded from insightful knowledge because of the assumption that an outsider is incompetent to study the group beyond a superficial level. A moderate claim is that insiders are more capable than outsiders in terms of identifying what is well worth exploring for the group. Also pointing out the benefits of conducting insider research, Deutsch (1981) suggests that outsiders have to cope with the pressure of not accepting the 'truths' acknowledged by members of the group under study and the corresponding cost of losing the support of that group. However, being an insider does not signify having no drawbacks. Insider research is often questioned because of a lack of objectivity (Mercer, 2007), whereas research carried out by outsiders, who 'maintain a distance from the native point of view' (Babbie, 2010, p.302), is accredited with less personal bias.

Simply aligning these benefits and drawbacks with the insider–outsider dichotomy is controversial. 'Insiderness' alone is not a guarantee of better and deeper understandings about a certain community (Griffith, 1998). Nonetheless, being an outsider does not mean being free of influence from the 'truths' or values agreed by group members or automatically gaining a favourable degree of objectivity (Harding, 1977).

The current study can be taken as a case of mixing insider and outsider positionalities. To avoid the problem raised by Deutsch (1981, p.172), that many social science researchers attempt to be 'sufficiently 'outside' to be objective yet enough 'inside' to understand the phenomena being studied', I tend to position myself as both an outsider and insider in relation to the target population, and the exhibition of either/both personality depends on context. The insider/outsider mixture is supported by Merton (1973), arguing that individuals actually embody a set of statuses rather than a single one, and therefore may act as 'multiple insiders and outsiders' in different situations. My positionality as both an insider and outsider demonstrates that a person possesses 'multiplex identity' in real life (Kirin, 1993, p.673). In this case, the positionality as an insider/outsider should not simply be deemed as an 'either/or' choice (Deutsch, 1981, p.184).

In the case of this study, I locate myself as an insider of the student-participants due to one shared characteristic: my status as an international student pursuing HE in the same host country — the United Kingdom. Working on a PhD programme in the same destination country enables me to achieve the group membership shared by the target student population; that is, we are all international students learning in UK HE. Ideally, the self-positioned 'insiderness' could facilitate a sense of trust and hospitality (Zinn, 1979) in the students under study, so that they are more willing to participate and collaborate.

Despite the two characteristics manifesting myself as an insider researcher, I also position myself as an outsider due to a further comparison with the target population. In relation to academic staff teaching at UK Russell Group universities who are part of the target population of this research, I am an outsider because I have no teaching experience in UK HE institutions. I registered with the UK Border Agency and the university where I am studying under the status of 'student' rather than 'academic staff'. Moreover, my 'outsiderness' is highlighted in view of the power I have in influencing the design of the current research. Neither the teacher- nor the student-participants of this study had anything but a limited effect on the research design.

The insider-outsider dichotomy is usually tied to the issue of subjectivity and objectivity. Objectivity is often credited to outsider research and subjectivity to insider research (Deutsch, 1981; Mercer, 2007). However, it has been demonstrated in the positionality statement that the boundary of the insider-outsider division is actually flexible and blurred in that an individual might be a part of one community and a non-member of another (Merton, 1973). My unfixed position in relation to the target student population provides more evidence for the ambiguity of the boundary, in reality: I can swing between the insider-outsider positionality, depending on which facet (a Chinese, an international student in the United Kingdom; or the designer of the current research) of my identity is emphasised in various contexts. In this case, the link from subjectivity to insiders or objectivity to outsiders is questionable. Ferber (2006) argues that 'subjectivity and objectivity are the factors by which insiders and outsiders define one another' (p.176) and that the attempt to attain pure objectivity is illusory, because it is virtually 'entirely inappropriate in any discipline' (p.178).

For the current study, the decision to adopt both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection (discussed in section 3.4) is partially due to my belief that the pursuit of either pure objectivity or pure subjectivity is impractical, although the key reason for my decision is the need to answer the research questions as well as possible (details in section 3.4.2). This belief is impacted by: a) the multiple statuses that a researcher possesses in reality; and b) the barely identifiable insider-outsider boundary to which an inquirer can easily align and confidently reject the other. A pursuit of such a boundary is especially impractical in social science research, where human beings are involved to various degrees (Cohen et al., 2007).

3.3 Theoretical perspective

In formulation of the theoretical perspective for this research, service quality developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988), intercultural adjustment by Searle and Ward (1990) and the U-curve theory by Lysgaard (1955) make significant contributions. These three key works, however, have influenced the quantitative and the qualitative strand of this research in different ways.

For the quantitative strand of this research, the theoretical perspective provided rationales and explanations for the hypotheses specified in section 3.5.2. According to Creswell (2014), pre-existing theories in quantitative research are important reference sources for what the researcher is to investigate and for the expected relationships between variables. Kerlinger (1979) provides a well-recognised definition of a theory as ‘a set of interrelated constructs (variables), definitions, and propositions that represents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining natural phenomena’ (p.64). In this definition, theories in quantitative research could account for how and why the constructs (variables) of interest are related, and these relations could be displayed in several ways, such as hypotheses or relational statements. In the current research, the proposed research questions were informed by the gaps identified in the existing literature on service quality (section 2.2.3) and intercultural adjustment (section 2.3.5). Moreover, the design of instrumentation for the quantitative strand was based on the theoretical perspective. For example, participants’ service quality perceptions were collected by the questionnaires developed by Angell et al. (2008) from Parasuraman et al.’s (1988) original service quality scale.

Throughout the qualitative strand of the current research, the three key works have also played a distinctive role. Creswell (2014) suggests that qualitative researchers use theory variously, such as ‘an up-front explanation, as an end point or as a transformative advocacy lens’ (p.67). When trying to interpret the stance of Glaser and Strauss (1967, cited in Mitchell and Cody, 1993) on the role of theory in the grounded theory method, Mitchell and Cody assert that no researcher is able to separate himself totally from a theoretical perspective, so making it explicit is more desirable.

For the current research, the role of the theoretical perspective in the qualitative strand is twofold. In the first place, the research questions to be addressed in the qualitative phase are informed by the existing literature. Before conducting the interviews, a list of the open questions (Research Questions 4, 5, 8 and 9) was drawn up. Again, these questions were in light of the gap in previous studies, in that the dynamic nature of individuals' perceptions of service quality and intercultural adjustment tended to be neglected. Miles et al. (2014) maintain that previous research and theories are important sources of input for a researcher's selection of a discrete phenomenon, likely interrelationships or constructs to investigate.

Second, the theoretical perspective influenced the qualitative data analysis procedure of this research – particularly the beginning of the inductive content analysis, which was the method adopted to analyse interview data (to be further explained in section 3.6.4). According to Mayring (2014) (Figure 3.1), the first two steps of inductive content analysis procedure are to determine what aspects of collected data are to be taken into account in analysis. In practice, the researcher analysed the interviewees' answers to each question in turn. The four literature-informed qualitative research questions guided the researcher to select information from the collected interview data. There were four pre-determined criteria of selection: what constitutes a high service quality of HE (Research Question 4); ways of improving HE service quality at the investigated university (Research Question 5); what influences Chinese students' intercultural adjustment (Research Question 8); and how the investigated university might support Chinese students' intercultural adjustment (Research Question 9).

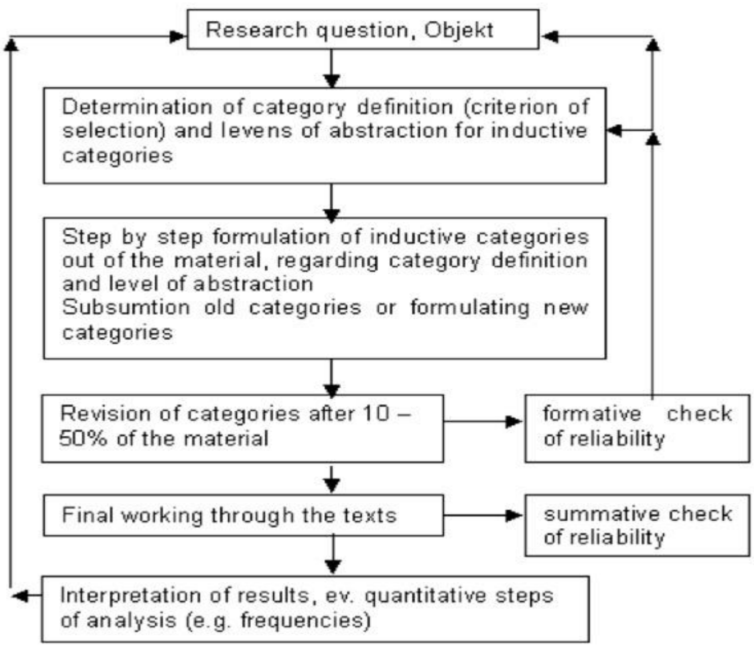


Figure 3.1: Step module of inductive content analysis by Mayring (2014, p.80)

3.4 Research design

3.4.1 Convergent parallel design

This research employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design consisting of a quantitative and a qualitative strand (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2008), where the two strands were undertaken separately and at the same time, then merged. The procedural diagram for this design is shown in Figure 3.2. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) referred to a *strand* as a constituent of a study that includes the basic procedure of doing quantitative or qualitative research. To address a separate group of research questions (listed in section 1.4.2 and in the previous chapter, sections 2.2.3 and 2.3.5) regarding service quality and intercultural adjustment, the quantitative and qualitative strands of this research were given equal importance. They were approximately convergent and were implemented independently of each other. The initial results of quantitative data and qualitative data did not interact until the researcher discussed in Chapter 5 to what extent the two sets of results reinforced each other or differed from each other in terms of the student-participants' and the academic-participants' perceptions of service quality of HE offered by their university and of Chinese students' intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom. When trying to merge the two sets of results, the researcher also particularly sought the complementarity (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) between them. The results of qualitative data were expected to provide richer information about where exactly were the differences between student- and academic-participants' perceptions.

In the quantitative strand, a cross-sectional survey was carried out. Quantitative data were collected to determine the level of service quality of UK HE, student-participants' self-evaluated intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom, the interrelationships between the perceptions on the two key concepts and whether there were any identifiable change patterns in these perceptions with the passage of time.

Buckingham and Saunders (2004) define a social survey as 'a technique for gathering statistical information about the attributes, attitudes or actions of a population by administering standardised questions to some or all its members' (p.13). This definition is applicable to the context of the current research, because people's perceptions of service quality are popularly regarded as a form of their attitude in the literature (e.g., Parasuraman et al., 1985). Besides, it could be argued that how Chinese international students evaluate their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom depends largely on their attitude toward their intercultural experiences in the United Kingdom and the previous experiences that they bring with them.

Nevertheless, it is impractical to include the entire target population (section 3.5.3) in this study due to its enormous size, its widely dispersed distribution across the United Kingdom or the limited resources available to a PhD student. Survey design enables a researcher who is unable to study every member of a large target population to ascertain some generalised features about it by means of carefully selecting a small sample (Fowler, 2009; Groves et al., 2004). Moreover, survey design is suitable for hypothesis testing (ibid.) and, in this research, there are literature-informed hypotheses (presented in section 3.5.2) to be tested. Given these considerations, choosing a survey for the quantitative strand appears to be appropriate.

The questionnaire was adopted as a means of quantitative data collection. Questionnaires are a popular tool for survey design, mainly due to the economic efficiency in gathering a considerable amount of information on various topics from people in different locations (Buckingham and Saunders, 2004). Hard copies of the student-version questionnaire were physically distributed by the researcher to potential student-participants. To recruit academic staff-participants, the questionnaire distribution in this study was over the internet. As Wright (2005) suggests, an internet-based survey design is particularly advantageous in terms of its ability to collect data from people who are geographically separate and in saving time (e.g., obviating trips to different locations) and money (e.g., without using paper or postage) for researchers. Distributing the questionnaire to potential academic staff-participants by email made the data collection convenient and economical. Additionally, it left teacher-respondents with more flexibility (e.g., when, where or how many goes) to complete it. The involved university provides easy access to computers on campus (e.g., in offices of teacher-respondents and in libraries), and the internet is offered across the university. Both situations can facilitate internet-based surveys (Nardi, 2006).

For the qualitative strand, several semi-structured, face-to-face, individual interviews with a smaller group of survey-respondents were conducted to collect qualitative data. In this research, interviews were understood as 'a conversation, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the [life-world] of the interviewee', concerning their interpretations of the phenomena of interest (Kvale, 1996, p.174). The interview is useful when what is studied is not directly observable (Creswell, 2014). It was believed that both service quality and intercultural adjustment, as a form of attitude, are subject to participants' perceptions in their mind. Thus, the researcher was not able to investigate the two concepts of interest by direct observation. More interactive approaches, such as interviews, are more able to provide a researcher with narrative data on individuals' opinions at greater depth (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Kvale, 1996). In addition, interviews have the advantage of allowing participants to reveal 'historical information' in detail (Creswell, 2014, p.191). The student- and academic-participants' perceptions of service quality and intercultural adjustment, to a large extent, were built on their previous educational and intercultural experiences. It was believed that soliciting more detailed information from interviewees could help the researcher to understand better how the two concepts have been differently interpreted by academics and Chinese students from the same university and how each side expects the university to improve the aspects related to the concepts further.

Interviews are structured to some extent, in that the 'exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance' (Cohen et al., 2007, p.353). Structured rather than unstructured interviews are usually organised in situations where inquirers are aware what they want to explore and the questions to be answered have been posed beforehand (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). In this case, interviews can provide the researcher with more control over the line of questioning (Creswell, 2014). However, in view of the open nature of all the pre-determined research questions, the interviews in this research were semi-structured. Apart from restraints on the order and wording of the questions and on the core concepts of interest, the current researcher attempted to put minimal restrictions on the content of participants' answers. The interview questions invited opinions (Cohen et al., 2007) that tended to differ from student to student, academic to academic and student to academic in the target population. Interviewees, when given more freedom and less control in the interview, might feel encouraged to give more in-depth and richer responses (Tuckman, 1972). As a result, it was expected that the open nature of the research questions would provide student and teacher interviewees with more space to voice their perceptions of service quality of HE offerings by their university or of their own/Chinese students' intercultural experiences in the United Kingdom.

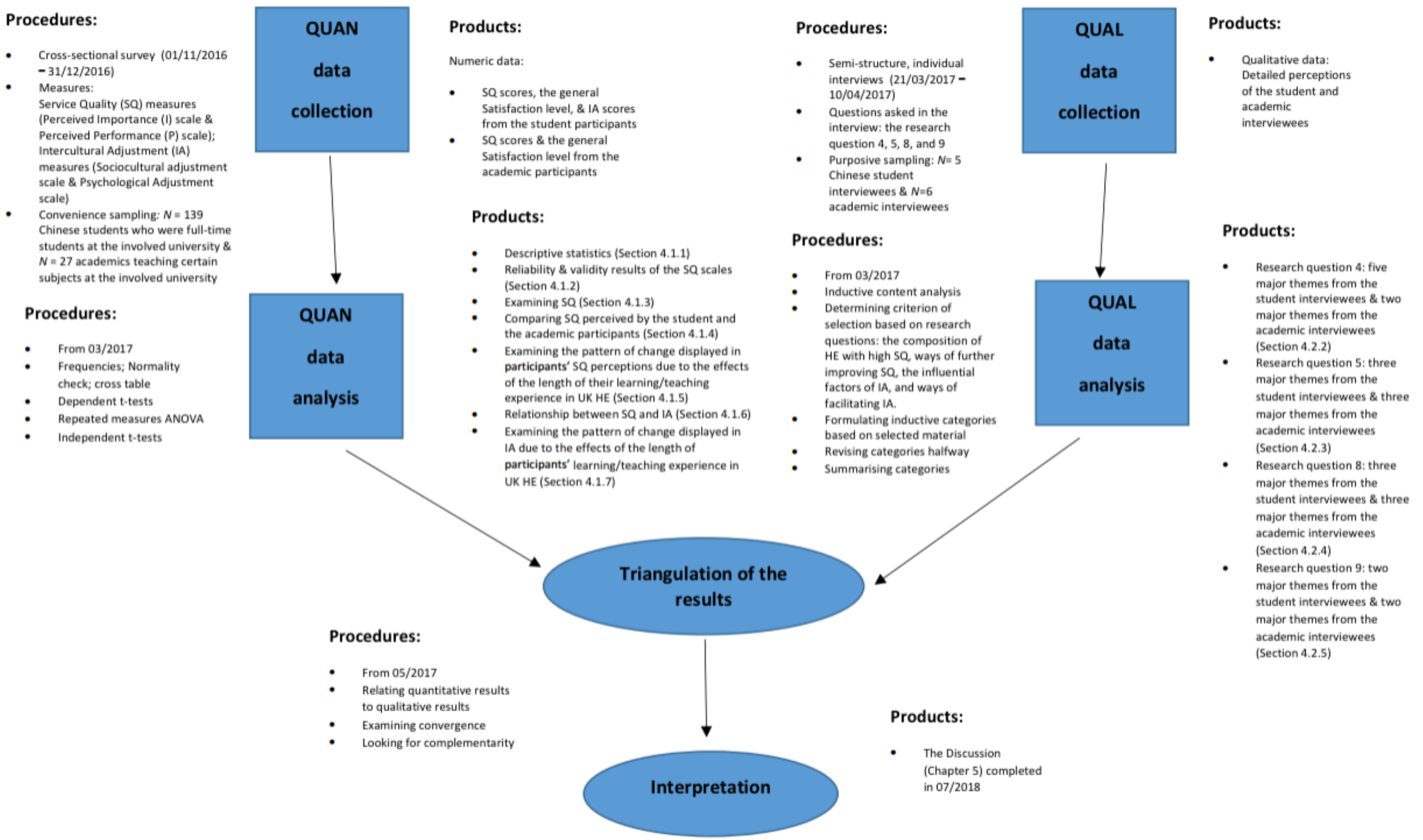


Figure 3.2: Procedural diagram for the convergent design of this research

3.4.2 Rationale for the research design

3.4.2.1 The role of research questions

The research questions of this study have been listed in section 1.4.2. Sections 2.2.3 and 2.3.5 display how these questions were generated in relation to the gaps in literature. The research questions played a determining role in the design process of the mixed-methods convergent parallel design, which should be the key principle of any mixed-methods study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Greene (2008) suggests that the methodology choice should primarily serve the research purpose and questions in practice. Such a practical consideration is also in line with my belief in pragmatism – it is the aim of answering research questions that determines which research approach to use (Cohen et al., 2007; Punch and Oancea, 2014). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) favour a mixed-methods approach for its advantages in addressing research questions for its flexibility to 'combine the methods in a way that achieves complementary strengths and non-overlapping weakness' (p.18). According to Punch and Oancea (2014), mixed-methods research refers to 'empirical research which involves the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data' (p.338). The contributions made by jointly using quantitative and qualitative methods to answer research questions are noted by Kanbur (2005), namely 'examining, explaining, confirming, refuting, and/or enriching information from one approach with that from the other' (p.18).

The research questions of this study cannot be adequately addressed by using solely either a quantitative or a qualitative method. Research Questions 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 call for the use of quantitative methods. To be more specific, some research questions (i.e., Research Questions 1 and 6) are concerned with participants' perceptions of service quality of HE and/or on Chinese students' intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom. The conceptualisations and operationalisations of these two key concepts were informed by existing abundant theories, which equipped me with knowledge about which variables to examine. Creswell (2014) claims that a quantitative method is the best choice when theories are to be tested and when a researcher has clear ideas about which critical variables to investigate. Question 2 is to determine whether there are statistically significant differences between the perspectives of student and staff participants. Furthermore, Research Questions 3 and 7 look for the influence of the length of participants' HE experience on changing their perceptions. Creswell (2009) suggests that in the course of identifying the impacts of causes on an outcome or correlations among a set of factors, quantitative methods are usually adopted to generate quantitative data.

Using a qualitative method is also necessary, given the requirement of Research Questions 4, 5, 8 and 9. To elaborate, Questions 4 and 8 require exploration of in-depth information from student- and academic-participants on their perceptions of factors impacting on HE service quality and intercultural adjustment. The detailed information, though, cannot be efficiently and sufficiently collected by a survey covering only existing scales. Moreover, Research Questions 5 and 9 seek suggestions about the university's future actions to enhance service quality and to facilitate Chinese international students' intercultural adjustment. Qualitative research methods, such as interviews, serve these research questions better due to their advantage over quantitative methods through giving access to what individuals think in their minds in greater depth and more detail (Cohen et al., 2007; Tuckman, 1972).

3.4.2.2 The advantages of the chosen research design

Another major reason for choosing a convergent parallel design is that the quantitative and qualitative data were expected jointly to present a better understanding of service quality of UK HE and of Chinese students' intercultural adjustment. Denzin (1978) links the term *triangulation* to studies where multiple data are collected from multiple sources by multiple methods to investigate the same phenomenon. Davis et al. (2011) found that the most common benefit of carrying out a mixed method research, as discussed in the literature, is that triangulation of evidence provides convergence and therefore contributes to the robustness of findings. Jick (1979) states that the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative results can go beyond providing convergence. It can also 'capture a more complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal of the unit(s) under study' (ibid., p.603).

For this research, triangulation was implemented in the Discussion (Chapter 5), where the researcher tried to find out to what extent the quantitative and qualitative results reinforced each other. The weakness of survey data was nicely compensated for by the strengths of doing qualitative interviews (Jick, 1979; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morse, 2003). The survey data provided a general picture about the degree to which academics' and students' perspectives about HE service quality and Chinese students' intercultural adjustment are inconsistent. However, the survey was not able to reveal the dynamics of these perceptions (e.g., where were the gaps?). Conversely, the results from the interview data could not demonstrate the statistical relationship between two concepts. Nevertheless, they supported the quantitative relationship identified from the survey data, and also complemented that relationship by offering richer insights into why it exists. Given the potential pitfalls and advantages in the survey and the interview, the researcher believed that implementing mixed-methods research and triangulating the different findings made for a more appropriate strategy to understand, in a holistic as well as a contextual way, how the two groups of participants thought about service quality and intercultural adjustment.

3.5 Quantitative strand

3.5.1 Research questions and hypothesis for quantitative strand

To be consistent, the order of the research questions is the same as presented in section 1.4.2. In order to answer Research Question 1, seven hypotheses were formed in advance.

1. From the perspective of international students and academic staff at UK universities, what is service quality of the HE provided by the current university?

As pioneers of the concept of service quality, Parasuraman et al. (1985) identified five gaps from the company that they researched, with one of them forming a discrepancy between expected and perceived service in the views of consumers of that firm. In the HE context, Angell et al. (2008) discovered that the university in investigation underachieved (higher scores for perceived importance of service quality attributes, and lower scores for perceived performance of actual educational offerings) in three of the four identified service factors. The results of Angell et al. (2008) are in line with many studies reviewed in section 2.2.2. For instance, Joseph and Joseph (1997), the first researchers associating the measurement of service quality with IPA in the HE context, also found out that participants gave higher scores to university performance of just two service factors. Based on these research findings, the following two hypotheses are predicted to address Research Question 1. In order to test the Hypothesis 1 and 2, both the direction and size of the I-P gap will be calculated for individual item and sub-factor of the service quality measures. According to Parasuraman et al. (1985), a negative (the direction resulting from low importance and high performance in the context of this study) and wide (the size determined by computed I-P differences) gap indicates a satisfying level of service quality in the eyes of evaluators.

> Hypothesis 1: International students award higher 'importance' scores for the service quality of UK HE, and lower 'performance' scores for the HE offerings of their own university.
>
> Hypothesis 2: UK academic staff award higher 'importance' scores for the service quality of UK HE, and lower 'performance' scores for the HE offerings of their own university.

2. Are teachers' and international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university significantly different from one another?

As discussed in section 2.2.3, one insufficiency in the existing literature on the service quality of HE is that the perceptions of academic staff tend rarely to be heard, given the substantial number of studies focusing on student perceptions. As an example of the scarcity of research examining perceptions of both students and academic staff, the work of Percy and Salter (1976) suggests that students and academic staff may hold divergent perceptions when they evaluate the quality of the HE service. Thus, this research predicts that:

Hypothesis 3: There are statistically significant differences between service quality of UK HE as perceived by international students and by UK academic staff.

As part of answering Research Question 2, this study also pays attention to the aspects that were considered the most (or least) important by both international students and UK academic staff. In other words, the consistency between the two groups' perceptions of service quality of UK HE will also be analysed and presented (see Section 4.1.3.5).

7. What is the change pattern (if any) in international students' perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom, with accumulating experience of participation in UK HE over time?

There seems to be a common view in the literature that international students' adjustment to the host country is a process over time, containing several phases. The U-curve pattern theory proposed by Lysgaard (1955) has attracted vast research attention and been extensively tested in various intercultural settings. Existing research findings, though, provide varying degrees of support for the existence of the U-curve pattern in sojourners' intercultural transition (e.g., Chang, 1973; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963; Ward et al., 1998). The current study intends to re-examine the U-curve theory in the modern day and in a new context, where the focus is the intercultural experiences of Chinese international students in the United Kingdom. Moreover, it attempts to extend the U-curve theory to the investigation of students' perceptions of service quality of HE. These perceptions are tentatively deemed to change over time, as well. Under these circumstances, the following three hypotheses are formulated to address Research Question 7:

Hypothesis 4: With students obtaining more learning experience in UK HE over time, the changes in their self-evaluated intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom display a U-curve pattern.

6. Is there any statistically significant relationship between international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by their university and their perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom?

In this study, it is believed that the intercultural adjustment to the host country achieved by international students is interrelated with their HE experience in that country. The research conducted by Selby and Woods (1966) was a pioneering instance that related the intercultural adjustment of overseas students to their academic life and then explored the changing patterns. Based on survey data from Chinese students undertaking a foundation course on academic English in the United Kingdom, Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) found that the psychological adjustment of respondents was negatively related to end-of-course GPA. In addition, they reported that there were positive relationships between psychological stress and the sociocultural adjustment of respondents whose academic life played an important role in these relationships. In view of this evidence, this study postulates that Chinese students' self-perceived intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom is connected to their perception of the quality of HE service offered by their host university.

> Hypothesis 5: For international students, there is a positive correlation between their self-evaluated intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom and their perception of the service quality of HE provided by their host university.

3.5.2 Target population and sampling strategy

The target population of this study consists both of international students who have enrolled as full-time students in academic year 2016/17 at Russell Group universities in the United Kingdom, and the academic staff of the Russell Group universities in the United Kingdom.

Given the huge number and wide dispersion of the targeted international student population, it is not possible to include every international student into this study. For the quantitative strand, a convenience sampling strategy was therefore adopted to select a sample university and a certain national group of international students to which the researcher usually has easy access (Cohen et al., 2007; Lavrakas, 2008). A common definition of convenience sampling is doing research with certain cases of the target population that have easy accessibility (Saumure and Given, 2008).

For this study, a particular national group – Chinese students – are specifically approached due to two important reasons. The first is that Chinese students comprise the largest proportion of the total international students in the United Kingdom, as shown in section 1.1.2. This considerable number of them provides the current researcher with relatively "convenient" sources of data with easier accessibility (Etikan et al. 2014; Lavrakas, 2008). However, it has to be acknowledged that using the convenience sampling has statistical limitations in terms of neither sampling biases nor the probabilities of sampling errors can be quantified (Etikan et al.,2014; Leiner, 2016). So the sample of Chinese students involved this study has the limited capacity to represent the whole targeted population. This means that there are definite limits to the scope and depth of analysis this study can bring to the complex issue of service quality and intercultural adjustment, especially given the diversity of international students in the UK HE. For example, the current study cannot provide data about other national groups of international students studying in UK HE. The findings of this study, therefore, should be seen as indicative, rather than definitive, with regard to international students in the UK HE and even with regard to the Chinese student community in the UK HE.

The second is that the researcher herself is an international student from China. This nationality in common is an "'ascribed status"' (Merton, 1972, p.102) or an "'innate feature"' (Mercer, 2007, p.4) of our identity, endowed with us since our birth. It is hoped that this shared characteristic could also bring convenience to the sampling phase by facilitating a sense of trust and hospitality (Zinn, 1979) in potential student participants, so that they would feel more willing to participate and collaborate.

The academic year 2016/17 was chosen because it when the main data collection phases of this study took place.

Only Russell Group universities, rather than all universities in the United Kingdom, are of interest, for four main reasons. In the first place, there is an overt tendency for international students strongly to prefer to enter Russell Group universities. Hobsons (2014), collaborating with 16 UK and Australian universities, conducted an international student survey. Based on the 18,393 responses across 198 nationalities, Hobsons reported that the two most important factors that international students consider when selecting an institution to study are the quality of education in comparison to their home country and the international recognition of its qualifications. The Russell Group consists of 24 leading UK universities enjoying a reputation for 'maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public section' (Russell Group of Universities, n.d.). Its member universities have become the most popular host HE institutions by far in the United Kingdom (Department for Business, innovation & Skills, and Department for Education, 2013). Graduates from Russell Group universities also seem to enjoy prestige in the employment market (HESA, 2017).

Second, Russell Group universities host more than a third of all total international students in the United Kingdom. Within a single member university, there are on average 6,200 international students, and this figure on average accounts for approximately 27 per cent of the total student population of that university (ibid.).

Third, despite hosting a large proportion of all international students, Russell Group universities still enjoy a high level of student satisfaction in terms of providing high-quality education. It has been reported by the 2016 National Student Survey (NSS) that the proportion of students at Russell Group universities who feel satisfied with the quality of courses provided was higher than that indicated by students from all other higher education institutions universities (HEFCE, 2016).

Fourth, Russell Group universities have prestige from winning research funding. They have attracted the vast majority (67%) of quality-related research funding (2014–15) from HEFCE (THE, 2016). According to the policy document published on the Russell Group website (2017), Russell Group member universities received 17 per cent of the total funding from the European Research Council (ERC), while the other HE institutions in the United Kingdom won just 4 per cent.

In view of the apparent student preference, the outstanding number of international students hosted and the superior performance in respect of students' satisfaction over non-Russell Group HE institutions, this research focuses particularly on universities from the Russell Group.

Nevertheless, it would be practically impossible and certainly inefficient for a PhD student to visit every Russell Group university and contact every student and member of academic staff in the target population. It is hardly feasible to obtain a perfect sampling frame that matches the target population exactly, which would incur a coverage error – a mismatch between the units in the adopted sampling frame and those in the full target population (Groves et al., 2009).

Thus, it was essential to adopt sampling, 'a procedure to select a limited number of units from a population in order to describe this population' (Saris and Gallhofer, 2014, p.9). In survey design, the representativeness and size of samples are critical (Greene, 2008). At the quantitative phase, this study employs a cluster sampling strategy (De Vaus, 2002), because the students and teachers in the target population are widely dispersed in various cities across the United Kingdom. This would lead to great inconvenience and high fieldwork costs (Moser and Kalton, 1971). The target population is grouped first by the HE institution where the members are studying/working.

The Russell Group is made up of 24 HE institutions (listed in Table 3.2) listed online (Russell Group of Universities, n.d.). This research deems the 24 universities to be a relatively homogeneous group, based on the results of 2016 NSS Question 22 (HEFCE, 2016). The results of 2016 NSS were used for reference, because this research started the data collection process in 2016. NSS Question 22 was chosen because it has a bearing on the interest of the current research: it collects students' perspectives on the quality of HE provision by their current university, with a specific focus on the courses offered. Meanwhile, the 2016 NSS results account for part of the rationale for why this study concentrates on the Russell Group: its member universities as a whole were found to have higher levels of student satisfaction with HE quality than other HE institutions in the United Kingdom.

Table 3.2: Figures of Russell Group universities on 2016 NSS question 22 ('Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my course') (HEFCE, 2016)

	Satisfaction (%)	Institution	Satisfaction (%)
Newcastle University	90	Imperial College London	83
University of Oxford	90	University of Warwick	88
University of Cambridge	90	University of Manchester	85
Cardiff University	87	University of Nottingham	89
University of Durham	89	University of Liverpool	87
University of Exeter	91	University of Edinburgh	80
University of Glasgow	89	University of Bristol	86
University of Leeds	90	University College London	84
University of Sheffield	89	King's College London	82
University of Birmingham	89	London School of Economics and Political Science	75
Queen Mary University of London	84	University of York	89
Queen's University Belfast	90	University of Southampton	86

The relative homogeneity among Russell Group universities is due first, according to the figures of 2016 NSS Question 22 released by HEFCE (2016), to the spread of satisfaction values when Russell Group universities and non-Russell Group universities (Figure 3.3) were compared. The results confirm that Russell Group universities, as a whole, gained from their students more satisfied evaluations regarding the quality of HE offerings (mean=87%) than their non-Russell peers (mean=82%) in 2016. Between each two Russell Group universities (as Table 2.3 presents), the magnitude of the differences in student satisfaction results seems not to be so great as to call for further stratification. Second, the relative homogeneity of the Russell Group universities is supported by a closer spread of their student satisfaction values ($SD_{Russell}$=3.83), in relation to non-Russell Group universities displaying longer tails in Figure 3.1 ($SD_{non\text{-}Russell}$ =11.17). This implies that the level of student satisfaction achieved by Russell Group universities is comparatively similar. The last reason is that the published NSS results only indicate the level of student satisfaction in general. More specific statistics about the opinions of international students (e.g., Chinese students, which is the particular cohort of concern in this research) are unavailable. This makes a great contribution to the non-stratification of the 24 universities.

Because of the relative homogeneity argued above, one university from the 24 clusters was expected to represent all. In these circumstances, the practical advantages of selecting a single university should be seriously considered. A convenience sampling strategy was therefore adopted to choose a sample university to which the researcher usually has easy access (Cohen et al., 2007).

Of the 24 Russell Group universities, the University of Southampton was selected for the following reasons. In the first place, it was one of the 20 largest UK universities in 2015/16 in terms of hosting international students (7,225 in total) (HESA, 2017). In 2015/16, a total of 2,343 Chinese students (562 undergraduates, 1,702 postgraduates and 170 research students) were studying there (University of Southampton, n.d.), representing 32.4% of the university's total international students in that academic year. Until 2016/17, this figure grew to 2834 and accounted for 44.6% of the overall international student population (6350 international students in 2016/17) of that university (ibid.).

Second, it was feasible to collect data from this particular university, where the current researcher is undertaking her PhD project. She is familiar with the environment of the university so the data collection on the main campus would be easy and convenient.

Finally, a staff member of the international student office at University of Southampton was contacted at an early stage of the research design process. She offered help to explore the possibility of sending the student questionnaire to all Chinese international students enrolled on the university system when the main data collection was conducted. If this could be realised, it would mean that each individual Chinese student would have an equal chance of taking part in this study. In this case, the sampling error (Groves et al., 2004) would be reduced.

The researcher also used a convenience sampling strategy to undertake the survey at the chosen university. To maximise the participation of Chinese international students who were full-time students at the selected university in 2016, the researcher distributed the student-version questionnaire in the main library, which provided easy access to a large group of Chinese students. To recruit the academics teaching at the selected university, the researcher contacted all academics from certain disciplines (explained in section 3.5.4) which, based on recent statistics released by HESA (2017), were most attractive to Chinese international students. The rationale was that academic participants from those disciplines might have more experience of teaching and interacting with Chinese students, so that their perceptions of Chinese students' academic and intercultural experiences in the United Kingdom would make a significant contribution to the concepts of interest.

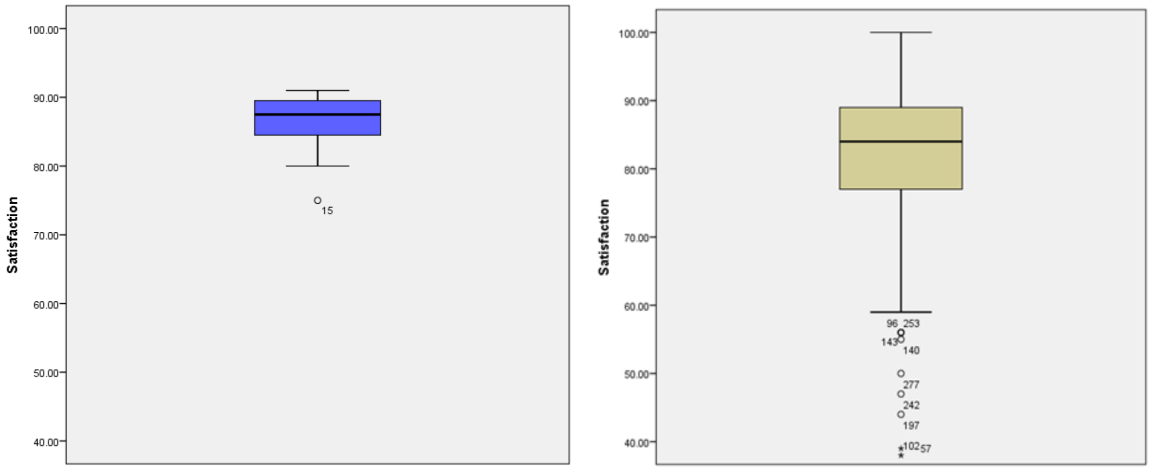


Figure 3.3: Spread of NSS Satisfaction values (Question 22) for Russell Group universities (left) and for Non-Russell universities (right)

3.5.3 Variables and instrumentation

The questionnaires for Chinese students (Appendix A) and for academic staff (Appendix B) were accompanied by a participant information sheet (Appendix C) to provide them with detailed information regarding this study. The two versions of the questionnaires share three sections. The first is concerned with participants' perception of service quality of UK HE, while the second is made up of an item to measure satisfaction and an open-ended question on participants' perceptions of the important attributes of high-quality HE. The last common section is a set of demographic questions. The student questionnaire differs from that for staff, because it has an additional section of items to measure their self-perceived intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom.

In accordance with the theoretical perspective in section 3.4.3, the rest of this section elaborates the variables of interest and the corresponding measures employed by this research (summarised in Table 3.3).

Perceived service quality: As the originators, Parasuraman et al. (1988) conceptualised perceived service quality on the basis of the calculation of the E-E gap. However, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 suggests that using the SERVQUAL to measure E-E gaps is debatable, because of an instability in its claimed dimensionality across contexts and the difficulty of measuring people's expectations, which are likely to change.

In order to calculate perceived service quality, the current research adopts the measures developed by Angell et al. (2008) for the following reasons. The first is that the work of Angell et al. is an example of applying service quality to the context of UK HE, similar to the current research. All 365 students engaged in the study of Angell et al. were postgraduate taught students, and only 40% of them were international students. So it is worth of attention that the service quality scale developed by Angell and his colleagues was not for international students in particular, although international students represented an important proportion of the original sample.

Second, Angell et al. (2008) operationalised perceived service quality on the basis of the IPA framework by Martilla and James (1977). Unlike SERVQUAL, IPA collects ‘importance’ and ‘performance’ scores to replace the ‘expectation’ and ‘experience’ scores respectively, from which the difference scores could be worked out. Moreover, IPA allows more flexibility than SERVQUAL in terms of dimensionality in different contexts. While the five dimensions of SERVQUAL are found to be unstable in an HE setting, IPA advises researchers to identify the most context-relevant and critical attributes of HE service through different qualitative methods, such as the in-depth interviews used by Angell et al. (2008). Apart from more flexibility, the collection of the importance scores instead of the controversial expectation scores would bring more consistency to data because individuals, as informed by the literature, may interpret the term ‘expectation’ variously. In light of the literature, some previous researchers (e.g., Cronin and Taylor, 1992) have even questioned the expectation measures with an argument that potential students had little or no previous experience of HE on which to form realistic expectations. If a particular factor or attribute is perceived to be *important* with regard to its contributions to the quality of HE service, it seems reasonable to assume that a desirable quality of that factor/attribute itself should also be *expected*. Finally, the measures based on IPA produce an IP matrix where potential areas of concern are visibly identifiable for diagnostic purposes (Angell et al., 2008; Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Martilla and James, 1977).

To be more specific, the instrument by Angell et al. (2008) measures ‘expectations’ in the definition of individuals’ perceived importance – how important they think a certain aspect is in terms of contributing to high-quality HE in general. Meanwhile, it measures ‘experiences of the service’ as people’s perception of performance – how they evaluate, in view of their own past and ongoing experiences in UK HE, the performance of HE offering at the university where they are studying or working.

There are 18 items in Angell et al.’s instrument. The rating for each item is based on a five-point Likert scale. The instrument is used twice separately to gain the ‘importance’ and ‘performance’ scores. According to Angell et al., there are four factors for the 18 items regarding service quality in UK HE: academic, leisure, industry links and cost. The reliability of the factors ranges from .60 (industry-link factor) to .91 (academic factor). Nevertheless, no general reliability was reported in their study.

Intercultural adjustment: For the current study, the framework of Ward and Searle (1990) guided the conceptualisation and operationalisation of intercultural adjustment. As suggested by Black (1988) and Wilson (2013), this study intends to measure intercultural adjustment both within and outside the academic situation. However, one major difficulty with studies on intercultural adjustment has been the lack of consensus on what constitutes it (Brein and David, 1971; Church, 1982; Tucker et al., 2004). After a review of 245 studies of the literature, Tucker (1974) drew a conclusion that there was no common definition or measures of ‘adjustment’.

Based on an extensive literature review, Ward and Searle (1990; 1991) noted that intercultural adjustment has implicitly contained two dimensions: a psychological dimension and a sociocultural dimension. They, based on the data collected from 105 international students in New Zealand (99% of them were Chinese students), divided intercultural adjustment into two broad categories – psychological and sociocultural adjustment. The former pertains to international students' 'feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction' in the host country, while the latter refers to their 'ability to fit in or negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture' (Ward and Searle, 1990, p.210).

Sociocultural adjustment: The original sociocultural adjustment scale (SCAS) was designed by Ward and Searle (1990) and consists of 20 items. It measures the skills and aspects that are important in international students' daily life in the host culture. Ratings were made on a four-point Likert scale; hence, the total scores are within the range of 0 to 80. The reported internal reliability of SCAS was 0.94.

Nevertheless, the SCAS is not freely accessible online. Therefore, the current research makes use of the SCAS-R, a recently revised version of the original SCAS by Wilson (2013). The study of Wilson (2013) was based on a Meta-Analysis of 80 studies having used the SCAS to operationalise the construct of sociocultural adjustment. Wilson conceived the SCAS-R as "a measure of self-reported behavioural proficiency in adapting to a novel cultural setting" (2013, p.63). The average of SCAS-R could be seen as an overall indicator of behavioural competency including four sociocultural domains: intercultural communication, community involvement and personal interests, work or academic performance and ecological adaptation.

The SCAS-R is made up of 21 items, and scores are based on a five-point Likert scale. The number 1 represents 'not at all competent', while the number 5 means 'extremely competent'. Wilson (2013) reported that five factors underpin the 21 items: interpersonal communication (α=.89); academic/work performance (α=.86); personal interests and community (α=.76); ecological adaptation (α=.71); and language proficiency (α=.90). In general, the SCAS-R was tested to be reliable with an overall international consistence (reliability) .92.

Psychological adjustment: This research employs two scales to measure the student participants' psychological wellbeing in the UK, both of which are also freely available online. Both were based on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). One is Diener et al.'s (2009) Flourishing Scale (FS), made up of eight brief statements concerning the socio-psychological prosperity of different aspects such as self-esteem, optimism and relationships with others. Individuals rated each item based on a self-assessment of their own lives. Scores of the eight items produce a single psychological wellbeing score. In addition to free availability, FS has an advantage in terms of its favourable psychometric performance in assessing self-reported psychological wellbeing in the research by Diener et al. (2010). According to a sample of 689 colleague students from six countries, FS demonstrated a high reliability (α=.87) and a high convergence with the summed scores of other similar psychological wellbeing scales, at .78 and .73 respectively. Although the FS was not designed to measure psychological wellbeing of international students in particular, it was deemed as a promising tool to be applied to an intercultural setting (Diener et al., 2009; 2010) and has been translated into various languages by its authors. For instance, the recent research conducted by Giuntoli et al. (2017) demonstrated that the FS is a reliable and valid instrument of well-being when applied to an Italian context.

The other scale for psychological adjustment is a short five-item instrument – the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) designed by Diener and his colleagues (1985). It provides a global cognitive judgement of how satisfied an individual is with his own life, rather than a measurement of satisfaction with any specific aspect (e.g., health) (Neto, 1993). Diener et al. (1985) report that SWLS has an internal consistency of .87, based on their data from American undergraduates. After surveying 217 adolescents at Portuguese public schools, Neto (1993) confirmed a satisfactory internal consistency of SWLS (α=.78). Moreover, he found that a single factor emerged from the data and accounts for 53.3% of the variance. This finding is in line with the results (66%) of Diener et al. (1985). The work of Neto also suggests the potential for SWLS to be applicable to various cultural contexts (e.g., the UK context, as in this research).

Length of experience in UK HE: This variable is measured by a single item in the demography section. The item asks participants to state how long, approximately, they have been studying/teaching in UK HE.

Table 3.3: Summary of variables and instrumentation

Variable	Instrument and Source	Total No. of Items
Perceived service quality	the scale by Angell et al. (2008)	36
intercultural adjustment 1. Sociocultural adjustment 2. Psychological adjustment	1. SCAS-R by Wilson (2013) 2. FS by Diener et al. (2009) SWLS by Diener et al. (1985)	34
Length of learning/teaching experience in UK HE	the item *You have been studying/ working in UK HE for about ____ months/years.*	1

3.5.4 Data collection process

Quantitative data collection started on 1 November 2016 and terminated on 31 December in the same year. The questionnaires for the students and the academic staff were distributed in different ways at different points of time. Due to the following reasons, both versions of questionnaires were presented in English rather than translated into participants' mother language: 1) All student participants speak Chinese as their first language. However, whether staff participants share the same first language is unpredictable in advance as they may come from different countries. As Harzing (2006) maintained, translating same abstract constructs into different languages might lead to differential interpretations, because the intensity associated with these translated languages might be different from the original language. In the case of this study, if the student version of questionnaire was translated from English into Chinese and the staff version was in the original language (i.e., English), any differences in intensity between languages would only apply to the student version of questionnaire and might be an important reason for the differences between students' and staff's responses; 2) The student version of questionnaire was not translated into Chinese because of the researcher's careful consideration of practical issues. While trying to offer some recommendations for translating questionnaires, Brislin (1986) warned that the translation process is usually not unambiguous and might be time-consuming and costly. Harzing et al. (2009) recommended the translation-back-translation process to ensure the verification of the translated questionnaires. However, such translation process requires more than one bilingual translators and extensive discussions between translator and back-translators to verify changes and to maintain consistency across languages. For the current study, it is very challenging for a PhD student to have the recourses (e.g., time, sufficient research budget and the availability of professional translators who are proficient in English and Chinese) needed for translating the student version questionnaire; 3) Previous research has only provided some evidence that the language of a questionnaire can have an effect on participants' responses (e.g., Bond and Yang, 1982; Gibbons et al., 1999; Harzing 2006; Harzing et al., 2005; Harzing et al., 2009). Harzing et al. (2005) and Harzing (2006) suggested that the use of non-native language questionnaire might cause a language bias due to respondents' lack of confidence in answering questions in a non-native language or cultural accommodation, which was defined by Gibbons et al. (1999, p.372) as "giving a stronger endorsement to culturally relevant items in the language of the culture". Nevertheless, other researchers, such as Gibbons et al. (ibid.), Sanchez et al. (2000) and Tyson et al. (1988), found no significant differences between participants' responses to the native language version of the questionnaire and to the non-native language version.

After engaging with the literature, the researcher of the current study realised that there is only mixed evidence for the impact of using non-native language in a questionnaire. However, she was aware that those participants whose first language is not English (the student participants in particular) might find it challenging to understand or respond to some statements in the questionnaires. So before the student and the staff questionnaires were distributed, all participants were informed that the researcher was easily contactable if they wanted to ask for clarifications. The researcher also ensured that a lot of flexibility was given to all participants to complete the questionnaires. For instance, they had plenty of time before returning the completed questionnaire. They also enjoyed the full right to use dictionaries or search the internet to look up certain terms used in the questionnaire (such as "transferable skills"; "industry link") or to discuss with others (e.g., their friends, colleagues or the researcher) whenever necessary. Similar to Vygotsky (1994) and many educational linguists (e.g., Bruner, 1973), Scardamalia and Bereiter (1994) believes that more interactions and conversations with others can promote individuals' thinking. Durkin (2011) found that most of the Chinese international students in his study actually appreciated the constructive approach of thinking and learning under a condition that the social process is not very confrontational. Until the student version questionnaires were received, the student participants of this study had studied at the investigated university for minimum two months. At that phase of their learning experience in UK HE, it is arguable that the interactions they had had with their teachers, classmates and friends could facilitate their interpretations of above-mentioned terms.

Distribution of the student questionnaire began on 1 November 2016 and lasted for three weeks. Despite the earlier agreement between the researcher and the staff member in the international office, data collection from Chinese international students was not supported by the international office in practice. Instead, the researcher distributed the questionnaire to Chinese students who were studying in the main library of the investigated university during those three weeks. The selection of participants was random. The researcher made a brief self-introduction first to each participant, then explained what the study was about. All participants were given around 40 to 100 minutes to complete the questionnaire, depending on their individual preference. They were also free to choose a comfortable place to complete it, and were not under pressure to give answers to the questionnaire items in the presence of the researcher. Given the feedback from the pilot, the researcher informed all participants that she was available in the reception area of the library to answer any questions relating to the questionnaire. All completed questionnaires were required to be returned to the reception area of the library for the researcher to collect at the end of each day.

Distribution of the questionnaire for academic staff commenced on 5 December 2016 and finished on 31 December 2016. A formal invitation email was drafted and sent by the researcher to all the academic staff of the investigated university in six subject areas, including business and administrative studies, engineering and the environment, law, computer science, mathematical science, and creative arts and design. According to the statistics released by HESA (2017), these were the most popular subjects for international students in academic year 2015/16. Business and administrative studies is the foremost subject of study among international students, and 37.6 per cent of its students in the United Kingdom in 2015/15 were international. Figures for the other five subjects are: engineering and technology (32.5%), law (26.4%), mathematical sciences (21.8%), computer science (19.9%), and creative arts and design (16.9%). Once the questionnaire was filled in, academic respondents sent it back direct to the researcher.

3.5.5 Data analysis methods for quantitative data

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 21. In order to answer the various research questions needing quantitative methods, different statistical tests were performed.

In advance of conducting statistical tests, the 18 pairs of service quality items (18 items for expectations and 18 items for experiences) were divided into four HE factors. Informed by Angell et al. (2008), the *academic* factor is composed of the pairs 1, 5, 9, 11, 14, 16 and 18. The *leisure* factor contains six aspects represented by the pairs 2, 6, 10, 12, 15 and 17, while pairs 3 and 7 contribute to the *industry-link* factor of HE service quality, and the *cost* factor consists of the pairs 4, 8 and 13.

Research Questions 1 and 2 concern the university’s level of service quality of HE as perceived by its Chinese students and academic staff. According to Field (2009), the *t*-test is used to calculate the difference between two sample means. When the means of the expectations (i.e., perceived importance) and of the experience (i.e., perceived performance) were compared for each item and/or for the HE factor, a set of paired samples *t*-tests was performed, as they were scored in pairs by the same respondent. However, independent *t*-tests were also used to compare the difference in perceived service quality between the student- and teacher-respondents. Different ANOVA tests were employed to examine further the mean differences of service quality, such as across the four HE factors (one-way repeated measures ANOVA) and across the different study levels of the Chinese students (one-way ANOVA).

In order to track the anticipated change patterns of perceived service quality (Research Question 3) and of self-reported intercultural adjustment (Research Question 4) along with the length of respondents' learning/teaching experiences in UK HE, trend analysis based on ANOVA (Field, 2009; Laija, 1997) was performed. Research Question 6 was addressed by measuring the Pearson correlation coefficient (Field, 2009).

3.5.6 Ethical considerations

In this research, ethical issues were considered primarily using the framework of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2005), which provides six broad principles. In addition, the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research by British Education Research Association (BERA, 2011) were applied, as these relate particularly to educational research, to which this study belongs. The present research was carried out in the United Kingdom, which further demonstrates that complying with the guidelines of the Council of BERA is essential.

Among the six principles provided by ESRC, the second, third and fourth are particularly relevant to the current research. The second principle of ESRC (2005) is that participants should be provided with as much information as possible concerning the research so they may decide whether to be involved or not. The framework further suggests that, ideally, a written consent form should be sought, as studies with no consent are sanctioned only as a 'last resort where no other approach is possible' (p.24). This principle is echoed by the tenth and eleventh guidelines of the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. Consequently, the researcher made details, such as the purpose, methods and intended uses of the data, available in a participation information sheet. At the same time, at the end of the sheet, all subjects were asked to indicate their consent to participate by ticking a statement, 'I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be recorded and used for the purpose of this study'.

The third principle of ESRC (2005) maintains that the confidentiality of information should be preserved and participants' anonymity should be respected. This is mirrored by the guidelines on privacy in the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. In this research, the researcher stored all the data safely on a computer that needs a password for access. Meanwhile, the researcher made sure that the data remain anonymous by reporting without making any direct link to any particular participant.

The fourth principle is about voluntary participation. Specifically, it means that the individuals take part in the research voluntarily and have the right to refuse to participate or to leave the investigation whenever they wish (ESRC, 2005). This is similar to the fifteenth guideline in the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. In the invitation, all participants were informed of their rights and the researcher make sure that their involvement was coercion-free.

In compliance with the above principles, an ethical application (Ethics ID: 25747) (Appendix D) was submitted to the Ethics and Research Governance Online service (ERGO) of University of Southampton on 15 August 2016, for the data collection of the quantitative strand (survey). The Ethics Committee approved the application on 28 October 2016.

3.5.7 Pilot

According to Mertens (2010), it is advisable to test questionnaires many times in advance of the main fieldwork and then polish them in accordance with the feedback, and this whole process of designing, pre-testing and improving is termed pilot work. Similarly, van Teijlingen and Hundely (2001) suggest that researchers will benefit from carrying out a pilot because it helps to enhance survey quality by providing researchers, in advance, with valuable insights into the questionnaire's reliability, validity and practicability. In the case of this research, although the questionnaires in use consist of different scales borrowed from existing studies, it was still of paramount importance to evaluate beforehand whether the combination of adapted scales would work effectively with the target population and produce the data needed to address the research questions (Groves et al., 2009). As Oppenheim (1992, p.47) suggests:

> Pilots can help us not only with the wording of the questionnaires but also with procedural matters such as the design of a letter of introduction (and from whom it should come), the ordering of question sequences and the reduction of non-response rates.

Procedure of field pre-test

Ethical approval (Ethics ID: 17672) (Appendix D) was obtained from ERGO a month prior to the fieldwork starting at the end of September 2015, when the new semester commenced. However, Chinese international students and academic staff were recruited separately in different ways. To be specific, the questionnaire was randomly distributed by the researcher herself in person to newly registered student-participants on the days when they were required to complete online enrolment and had been invited to attend the induction sessions organised by their faculties. This particular time was chosen for two reasons: 1) academic induction and online enrolment were two important activities that could motivate new students to visit the campus, providing the researcher with easier access to them; 2) it was a critical time for most of the potential student-participants because they were newly arrived in the United Kingdom and were at the initial stage of the cultural adjustment process. In addition to those who were newly registered in UK HE, the fieldwork pre-test included two student-respondents who were continuing students in the School of Education. All student-participants of the pilot completed the questionnaire in the presence of the researcher.

The academic-respondents were all teachers at Southampton Education School, a department of the selected university. A personalised invitation letter was sent individually to the teachers in the first place. Subsequently, the questionnaire was distributed by email to those who had indicated an interest in taking part in the pilot. As a follow-up, face-to-face individual interviews (no more than 40 minutes) were organised with both types of respondents to elicit their views and feelings about completing the questionnaire.

Item improvement

Sequence of items

The first section of the original questionnaire contained items asking for personal information. However, these were moved to the end of the questionnaire in accordance with respondents' feedback and the researcher's own observations during the pre-test fieldwork. During an individual interview, one student revealed great concern about the arrangement whereby the personal information section immediately followed where he had signed his consent. However, the last item in the personal information section asked for respondents' participation in follow-up interviews, for which they needed to provide an email address for future contact. This meant that the email address that the respondents were to provide (if willing to be involved in follow-up interviews) was adjacent to the place on the consent form displaying their name, and this caused the respondent's concern about the anonymity of participation. In fact, Oppenheim (1992) tried to raise researchers' awareness of the importance of paying attention to the internal logic of component sections of a questionnaire and to the possible reactions that respondents may have to each section. He advised researchers to put the personal information questions toward the end of a questionnaire, as placing them at the beginning tends to demotivate respondents. He further explained:

> We must put ourselves in their [respondents'] place. Having had the purpose of the study explained to them in a cover letter or by the interviewer, and having agreed to co-operate too, they now expect some interesting questions dealing with the topic of the study… and if we start off with questions of this kind [classification or personal information] we should not be surprised if we get no further response. (Oppenheim, 1992, p.109)

In addition to feedback from respondents, moving the personal information questions to the end of the questionnaire was based on the researcher's own observations when respondents filled in the questionnaire. Some student-respondents seemed to struggle with the item asking about the approximate length of their learning experience in UK HE, and on average spent more time trying to write the answer. Krosnick (1999) points out that one important shortcoming of conventional questionnaire pre-testing is that researchers are not in a good position to tell what goes on inn terms of respondents' cognition while they are answering questions. Later in the individual interviews, two teacher-respondents reinforced the researcher's observation when they tried to answer the item regarding the approximate length of teaching experience in UK HE. They indicated that it was slightly hard, although possible if given enough time, to consider, count and then answer this item. Many researchers have suggested that to keep respondents motivated, the questions in a good questionnaire should follow a sequence from simple, gradually becoming more difficult (e.g., Cohen et al., 2007; Groves et al., 2009; Krosnick, 1999). As echoed by Oppenheim (1992), every single question in a questionnaire has 'a covert function: to motivate the respondent to continue to co-operate' (p.121). In summary, to avoid making respondents feel insecure and challenged from the start, the section of personal information questions was replaced at the end.

Types of scales

In the questionnaire for students, the three different intercultural adjustment measurements were changed to a five-point semantic differential scale. The first reason for this change is to achieve consistency. While both the Flourishing Scale (FS) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) used to measure Chinese students' psychological adjustment were originally based on a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), the instrument for sociocultural adjustment was designed to use a four-point difficulty scale. That meant that, even within the same section, respondents had to make their evaluation using different scales. Moreover, neither the seven-point nor four-point scale was as the same as that used in the previous section for measuring perceived service quality. That is to say, respondents had to pay attention to this inconsistency and to be cognitively conscious enough to switch scales with various metrics throughout the questionnaire, imposing additional demands on them. Some respondents mentioned in the individual interviews that they felt confused when answering questions because they always needed to refer back to the instructions at the beginning of each scale to confirm the range of numbers that they could give. As discussed earlier, attracting and maintaining respondents' cooperation should be an implicit task for each question in the questionnaire, hence consistency, such as with respect to the layout and print settings, should be maximised to make the questionnaire appear easy and attractive (Oppenheim, 1992).

In addition to consistency, another reason for the researcher's decision to apply a five-point semantic differential scale to all the instruments is its particular advantage in quantifying people's attitudes. As pioneers of the semantic differential technique, Osgood and his colleagues (1957, cited in Osgood, 1964, p.173) summarise that this type of scale is especially effective in measuring three factors: *evaluative* (e.g., good-bad, pleasant-unpleasant); *potency* (e.g., strong-weak, heavy-light); and *activity* (e.g., fast-slow, excitable-calm). Moreover, Wirtz and Lee (2003) discovered that, of all the commonly used satisfaction measurements that they have selected and compared, the semantic differential scales had the best performance when measuring customer satisfaction. In the context of this research, the two concepts under investigation (perceived service quality and international adjustment) are both reliant on respondents' perceptions. Consequently, they fall into the *evaluative* category. Additionally, according to the literature, perceived service quality has a close relationship with customer satisfaction. Thus, the semantic differential technique, displaying the best psychometric performance in Wirtz and Lee's (2003) comparative research, was selected.

Wording

For the terms measuring academic staff's perception of the importance of attributes in relation to their contributions to quality HE in the United Kingdom, the wording was changed from 'It is important to have…' to 'It is important for international students to have…'. Many teacher-respondents had indicated in the interviews that they could not see the relevance of some of the original items to their roles as teachers in HE. The best example is the statement 'It is important to have tuition fees at a reasonable expense'. However, the items were included in the questionnaire with the objective to ask teachers' opinions on how significant they think it is for Chinese international students (not the teachers themselves) to be offered these services. It is clear that the ambiguous wording had caused interpretations that deviated from what was intended. Cohen et al. (2007) point out that it is more reasonable to hope to minimise ambiguity in items rather than eliminate it altogether. Wording ambiguity is likely to result in misunderstandings or misinterpretations, thus respondents' answers to the questions are affected (Groves et al., 2009). The phenomenon whereby many teacher-participants in this research interpreted the items from the point of view of their roles as HE teachers reflected Oppenheim's (1992) advice that purely unbiased answers are hardly to be obtained, because it is unclear to what extent respondents can be influenced by their 'inner curbs on private or self-incriminating information, by poor rapport, by the wish to maintain a social facade and by the response expectations which the question may suggest' (p.121). Unfortunately, when encountering comprehension difficulties, only a few respondents are likely to feel comfortable enough to request clarification; most may 'try to muddle through on their own' (Groves et al., 2009, p.211). In the case of this research, it was hard for academic-respondents to ask for clarification, because the researcher was not immediately available when they were filling in the questionnaire. Therefore, even though some of them may not have been prevented by a sense of embarrassment from asking for clarification, the inaccessibility of the researcher emerged as another challenge.

Another source of wording ambiguity that led to interpretation problems is the term C*hinese international students.* Who can be regarded as an international student? What is the meaning of being Chinese? Does it refer to nationality, place of residence, ethnicity or some other thing? As Groves et al. (2009) point out, comprehension problems and diverse interpretations may be due to vague meanings of concepts, so it would be helpful if terms can defined as clearly as possible in the questionnaire. It is unwise to presume that every respondent has full knowledge of what is under inquiry (Oppenheim, 1992). Accordingly, a definition of international students as presented in section 1.5 was added to the participant information sheet. As for the term *Chinese*, it is operationalised in this research as students whose normal residence antecedent to their study in the United Kingdom is mainland China and who are Chinese passport holders.

In addition to the wording ambiguity, the researcher was aware that the wording of some items possibly encouraged respondents to give an answer influenced by social desirability bias or positivity bias, which again, to some degree, manifests Oppenheim's (1992) argument mentioned earlier: gaining answers free from bias is hard enough. Respondents' attitudinal judgement is very likely to be impacted by the wording of a question, from which they tend to infer the answers (Groves et al., 2009). The influence of social desirability bias was identified by the researcher especially when she observed student-participants evaluating their own psychological statement to complete the Flourishing Scale (FS) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). All the items in both scales are positively worded. Examples are: 'I am optimistic about my future' and 'I am satisfied with my life'. Student-participants attending the pilot seemed to prefer high scores for these items, and one possible reason might be that they wanted to convey a message to the researcher and to give themselves a prompt that their life in the United Kingdom is positive. However, this preference may be partly due to the presence of the researcher when the student-respondents filled in the questionnaire, which reflects what Oppenheim (1992) suggests that, usually if not always, 'face-to-face methods such as interviews are more likely to provoke respondents to put themselves in a better light than anonymous self-completion or postal issues' (p.139). The researcher had good reason to expect fewer positivity-preferred answers in the main data collection phase, because the questionnaire would be distributed online so that respondents could fill it in on their own, in the absence of the researcher.

Reliability and validity

Reliability

According to Oppenheim (1992), reliability refers to consistency, whereby a large proportion of respondents' answers are stable across different situations and at different times. Groves et al. (2009) suggest that using multiple items to indicate the same underlying construct is a widely adopted method to improve reliability, especially when respondents' subjective state is under investigation. Under these circumstances, the items are supposed to have a strong relationship both to the underlying construct and to each other (ibid.). In the context of this research, thus, Cronbach's alpha (α) is calculated on the basis of the pilot data to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire in question. Cronbach's alpha was calculated by SPSS, and the reliability results of each component scale in the used questionnaire are summarised in Table 3.4. The reported reliability for the original scales is listed in Table 3.5. Ranging from 0 to 1, a higher internal consistency coefficient (α) represents a higher reliability. A value of .70 is usually regarded as an acceptable level, while a value of .90 is viewed as relatively high reliability (Radhakrishna, 2007). The results in Table 3.4 show that all the scales used in the questionnaire have a Cronbach's alpha value close to or even greater than .90, which implies a high reliability.

Table 3.4: Reliability statistics of scales contained in the questionnaire

Original Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Service quality (Angell et al., 2008)	Varies among different underlying factors, ranging from .60 to .91. No overall reliability was reported.	18
Psychological Adjustment (SWLS by Diener et al., 1985 & FS by Diener et al., 2009)	SWLS: .82 & FS: .87	13
SCAS-R (Wilson 2013)	.92	21

Table 3.5: Reported internal consistency of original scales

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Perceived Importance (expectation)	.897	18
Perceived Performance	.857	18
Psychological Adjustment	.936	13
Sociocultural Adjustment	.931	21

Validity

Validity, different from reliability, relates to what extent the scales measure what they are supposed to measure (Oppenheim, 1992). There are different types of validity, and the choice depends on the research needs (Radhakrishna, 2007). Based on the results of the pilot, one type of validity was used: *content validity*. *Content validity* seeks to 'establish that the items or questionnaires are a well-balanced sample of the content domain to be measured' (Oppenheim, 1992, p.162). In the case of this research, it was evaluated by four experts with much experience in questionnaire design. All of them reviewed the questionnaire and then gave feedback on the wordings of items and instructions to respondents for completing the questions. As suggested by Groves et al. (2009), expert review of the questionnaire is of great importance to make sure that 'the questionnaire collects the information needed to meet the analytic objectives of the survey' (p.242).

3.6 Qualitative strand

3.6.1 Research questions for the qualitative strand

Four research questions had direct bearings with the qualitative strand. to be consistent, the order is the same as in section 1.4.2:

4	From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how can a high quality of HE service be provided by universities in the United Kingdom?
5	From the perspectives of its international students and academic staff, how can service quality of HE be improved at the university?
8.	From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how is intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom affected?
9	From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how can intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom be facilitated by universities in the United Kingdom?

3.6.2 Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used in this strand to recruit interviewees. It is a sampling technique widely used in qualitative studies to identify and select information-rich individuals or groups of individuals for the maximum use of limited research resources (Patton, 2002). According to Creswell (2012), purposeful sampling involves 'intentionally select individuals and sites to learn and understand the central phenomenon' (p.206) in qualitative research. For the current study, the major objective of conducting interviews is to achieve a depth of understanding regarding student- and academic-participants' perspectives, which depends largely on their willingness and availability to participate (Bernard, 2002). Purposeful sampling was adopted in this study to make sure that survey participants who were willing to be interviewed could actually be involved and shared detailed information on their relevant experience.

However, this sampling technique can be fraught with drawbacks, such as the limited capacity to generalise due to limited number of interviewees (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2009). There is considerable debate over whether the ability to generalise can be used as a criterion to judge quantitative research. As Lincoln and Guda (1985) noted, "the only generalisation is: there is no gernalisation" (p.110). Some authors attempted to re-conceptualise generalisability for qualitative research. For example, Patton (2002) suggested "extrapolations… modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations (p.584). In terms of the current research, the priority of this qualitative phase is to complement and contrast the quantitative phase with more depth and contextual data (Boyce and Neale, 2006), which is not accessible through the questionnaire data (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Interview data was collected to offer a richer picture of a small group of survey respondents' learning/teaching experience in UK HE, with a caution that the events and opinions shared by them might be considerably different from what others have experienced or might change over time. As suggested by Metcalfe (2005), the intention to generalise is different across qualitative designs, and researchers need to make their priorities explicit.

As a strategy, two pre-determined criteria for inclusion (Palinkas et al., 2015) were set up by the researcher to select interviewees: 1) they had responded to the survey questionnaires. It was assumed that those potential interviewees would be knowledgeable about the purpose and general design of this research due to their participation in the survey; 2) they had indicated their interest in attending a follow-up interview by giving the answer 'yes' to the item *Are you willing to receive the invitation for a follow-up interview that might be sent to you in the future,* and by voluntarily providing their email address at the end of the questionnaire.

3.6.3 Data collection process

On 8 March 2017, the researcher sent an interview invitation via email to the all potential student and academic interviewees. The invitation included a detailed description of the current research. To be specific, it answered the following questions:

- Where did I get your email address?
- What is the main objective of my study?
- What are the potential benefits if you join in the study?
- Where is the interview?
- When is the interview?
- How long is the interview?
- Will the information be kept confidential?
- What are we going to discuss during the interview?
- What will happen next?

With individuals who replied to the invitation and expressed an interest in being further engaged (by filling in the consent form), the researcher made out a schedule to accommodate their individual timetables and her own. For those unable to attend a face-to-face interview, an online interview via Skype was offered as an alternative. All interviews were conducted between 21 March and early April 2017. The location of each interview depended on the interviewee's preference. Each interview actually lasted for 30 to 50 minutes.

The interviews were conducted in English. However, the student participants were assured that Chinese could be used in special circumstances where they felt difficult to use English to express their experiences or opinions. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher informed each interviewee of the nature and key concepts of this research. Tuckman (1972) suggests that researchers should be honest about the research purpose before starting an interview. Then the conduct of interview was further explained: 1) the four questions (Research Questions 4, 5, 8 and 9) to be asked by the researcher in turn during the interview; 2) that the interview was to be recorded, for which the permission of each interviewee would be sought; 3) that the interviewee can ask questions during the process.

3.6.4 Data analysis methods for qualitative design

Content analysis was undertaken manually by the researcher to interpret the qualitative data gathered from individual interviews. Cohen et al. (2011) define content analysis as the 'process of summarising and reporting written data – the main contents of data and their messages' (p.563). Qualitative content analysis enables researchers to increase the understanding of a phenomenon under study by a repeatable and valid method to analyse communication messages (Elo and Kyngas, 2008). According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), research employing qualitative content analysis to understand collected data usually centres on the 'characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text' (p.1278).

With the guidance of Mayring (2014) (Figure 3.1), the current research used one qualitative content analysis technique, inductive content analysis, to understand the information collected from the interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain inductive content analysis as 'a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions' (p.12). For this study, this technique was adopted largely for two reasons. In the first place, existing relevant studies provide diverse findings about students' perceptions of HE service quality or how they think it could be improved. Likewise, international students' views on intercultural adjustment to the host culture or on how the host university could support their intercultural adjustment are varied. Thus, it was difficult to determine beforehand any initial categories that had been agreed upon in the literature to analyse the qualitative data collected from student and academic interviewees. Inductive content analysis, however, allows 'the categories and names for categories to flow' (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p.1279) from the collected data themselves, instead of requiring the researcher to use preconceived categories.

The second reason is that the researcher was greatly conscious of the dynamic nature of individuals' perceptions of service quality and intercultural adjustment. Thus, it is less likely that preconceived categories from the literature (if any) could capture the unique HE and/or intercultural experience gained by the two groups of participants at the researched university. Moreover, this research, to the best knowledge of the researcher, is the first trial to link the two key concepts in a unique context where the views of both Chinese international students and academics of Russell Group universities are investigated and compared. It is unlikely to find preconceived categories from the literature that meet the requirements of the particularity of this research's context. Inductive content analysis, as Mayring (2014) maintains, leads to 'understanding of the material in terms of the material' (p.79).

The procedure of inductive content analysis was guided by Mayring (2004). The first step was to decide the criteria for selecting the text to consider. In practice, the criteria were decided in light of the research questions. For example, for analysis of the student and academic interviewees' answers to Research Question 4, the applied criterion was: content relating to the composition of a high quality of HE service offered by UK universities to international students.

The second step was to clarify the units for analysis. For this research, the final themes were identified at the semantic level. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a semantic approach means that a researcher looks for themes based on the 'explicit or surface meaning of the data' (p.13). Given the dynamics in the interviewees' perceptions of service quality and intercultural experience, the researcher had expected the analysis to be driven by the collected data themselves rather than by her own understandings, beyond the sematic content of the data. The interview data were interpreted systematically in order of the four research questions to be addressed in the qualitative strand.

Ahead of generating the initial categories, the researcher went through and familarised herself with the data for each research question. Selected comments from every interviewee were then manually coded (e.g., A1, A2, etc.) by the researcher on the basis of the semantic content. Comments with similar semantic meanings or key words were collated into the same group. Tuckett (2005) suggests that initial coding is an important part of content analysis, as the data are allocated into meaningful groups.

The researcher counted the number of instances of initial categories from the previous step before searching for themes from those categories. However, the produced themes/main categories were not necessarily the most prevalent. Enlightened by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Mayring (2004), the researcher made an equivalent effort to look for themes that could capture the interviewees' experiences and expectations in relation to the qualitative research questions. In other words, a theme with a relatively small number of instances was kept as long as it provided important information on the student and academic interviewees' perceptions of HE service quality and Chinese international students' intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom.

As a final step, the emerged themes were reviewed by the researcher to make sure that there were recognisable differences between them, and that each underpinned the allocated initial categories.

To demonstrate how the final themes for each research question emerged from the qualitative data, an example is provided in Appendix E. The example shows the systematic and concrete procedure of inductive context analysis undertaken by the researcher to interpret the student interviewees' views on what contributes to HE offerings with a satisfactory level of service quality. The same procedure was applied to the analysis of all interview data.

3.6.5 Ethical considerations

For the qualitative strand, a separate ethical application (Ethics ID: 23439) (Appendix D) was submitted on 7 March 2017 and cleared by the ethics committee on 21 March 2017. This application was developed from the ethical considerations discussed in section 3.5.6, but it was submitted particularly for conducting individual interviews.

4. Data Analysis

This chapter presents an analysis of the quantitative survey and qualitative interview data collected for this research. The presentation is led by the research questions listed in sections 3.5.1 and 3.6.1. This chapter is divided into two substantive sections.

In the first section, student- and academic-participants' perceptions of service quality (SQ) of HE are analysed separately then compared to each other. The relationship between student-participants' SQ perceptions and their self-evaluated intercultural adjustment (IA) to the United Kingdom is also reported. This section includes the results of the effects on SQ and IA of participants' length of participation experience in UK HE. Figure 4.1 acts as a signpost to the report on the quantitative results in section 4.1. Reiterating the pre-existing instruments used in the quantitative strand of this research (section 3.5.3), HE SQ were examined by calculating the size and direction of the gap between participants' perceptions of Importance (I) and of Performance (P). With regard to Chinese international students' IA, student-participants' perceptions of their own sociocultural and psychological adjustment were measured. While a few tables of the results of the main tests are included in the body of this chapter, there are more statistical details in Appendix F (AF).

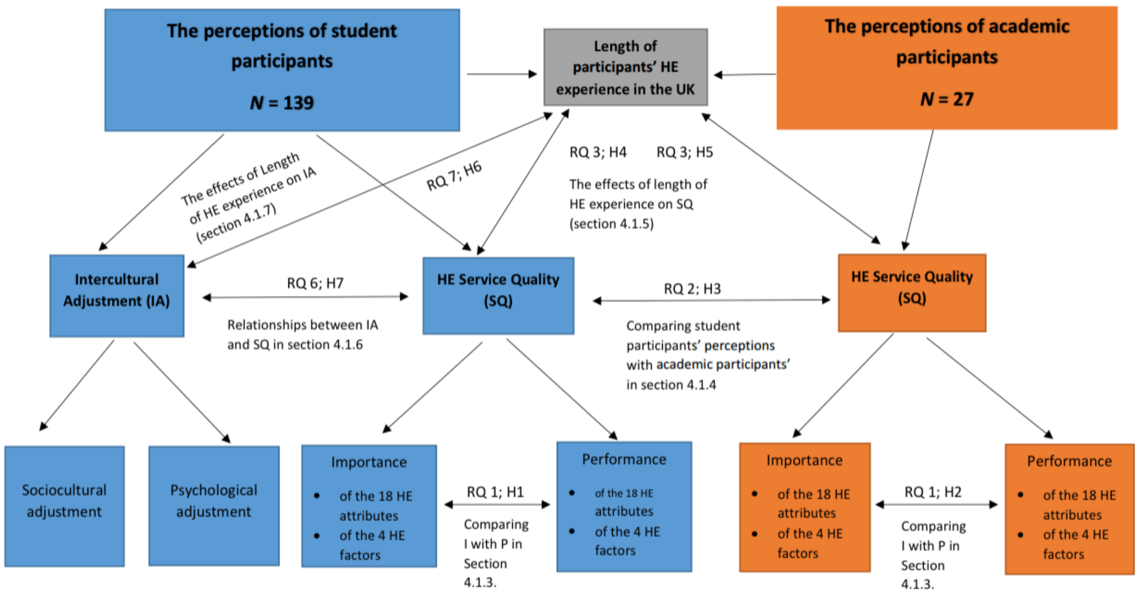


Figure 4.1: Diagram of the presentation of quantitative results

In the second section, the results of 11 individual interviews are presented. They provide in-depth insights into the expectations and experience of student and academic participants, including the composition of quality HE, how their university could improve the SQ of its HE offerings, influential aspects in Chinese students' IA and how to facilitate their intercultural adjustment.

4.1 Analysis of the quantitative data

4.1.1 Descriptive data

In total, there were 166 participants in this study: 83.7 per cent (*N*=139) were Chinese international students and 16.3 per cent (*N*=27) were academic staff. The majority of student-respondents were Master's students. In academic year 2016/17, the number of Chinese international students enrolled at the investigated university was 2,834 (University of Southampton, n.d.). There are approximately 5,000 members of staff at that university, but the number of academic staff is less than 3,000 (more than 2,000 are professional service staff) (ibid.).

Of the 137 Chinese student participants who provided information on their study level at the host university (as in Figure 4.1), those on postgraduate taught programmes made up the greatest proportion (62.8%). This figure is more than double that of undergraduate students (27%). Postgraduate research students and students registered with other HE programmes (e.g., Pre-Masters programme) occupied 8 per cent and 2.2 per cent respectively.

Table 4.1: Number of survey participants

Status			
Chinese international students	N	Valid	139
		Missing	0
Academic staff	N	Valid	27
		Missing	0

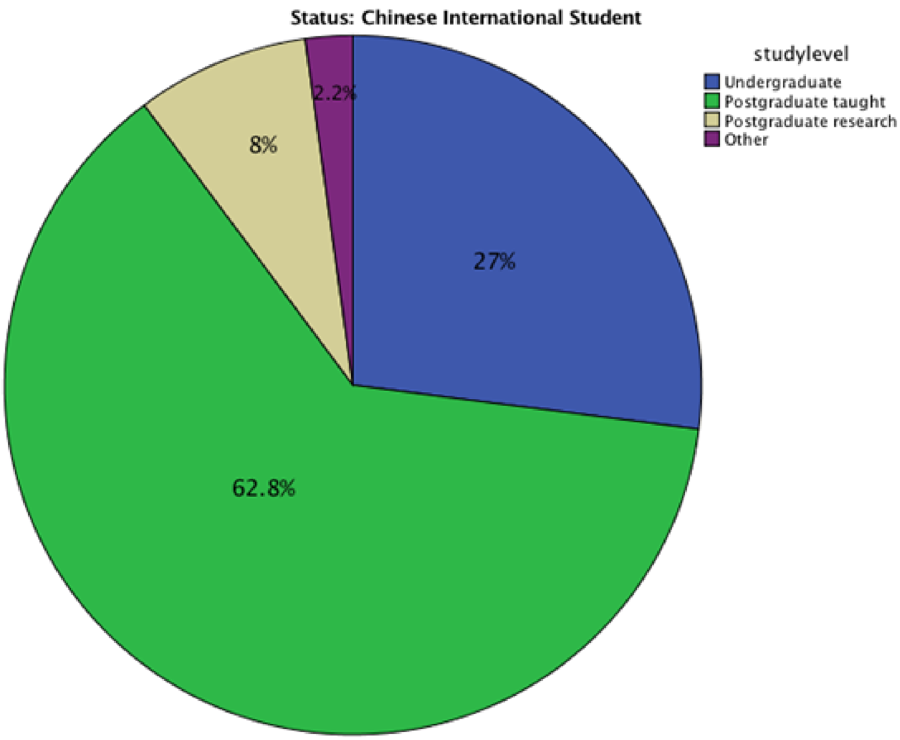


Figure 4.2: Study level of the student participant

Two participants left empty the box requesting gender information, and altogether five preferred not to reveal such information. Among the participants who indicated their gender (*N*=159), 68 (42.8%) were male, while the number of female was 23 more. When combining gender information with participant status, Figure 4.2 presents that males account for 37.2 per cent (*N*=51) of the total Chinese student-participants, and females 59.9 per cent (*N*=82) of the same cohort. When it comes to academic staff participants, 17 were male and nine female, contributing to 63 per cent and 33.3 per cent of the cohort, respectively. Only one academic staff respondent was inclined not to indicate his/her gender in this study, compared to four student-respondents who preferred not to provide gender information.

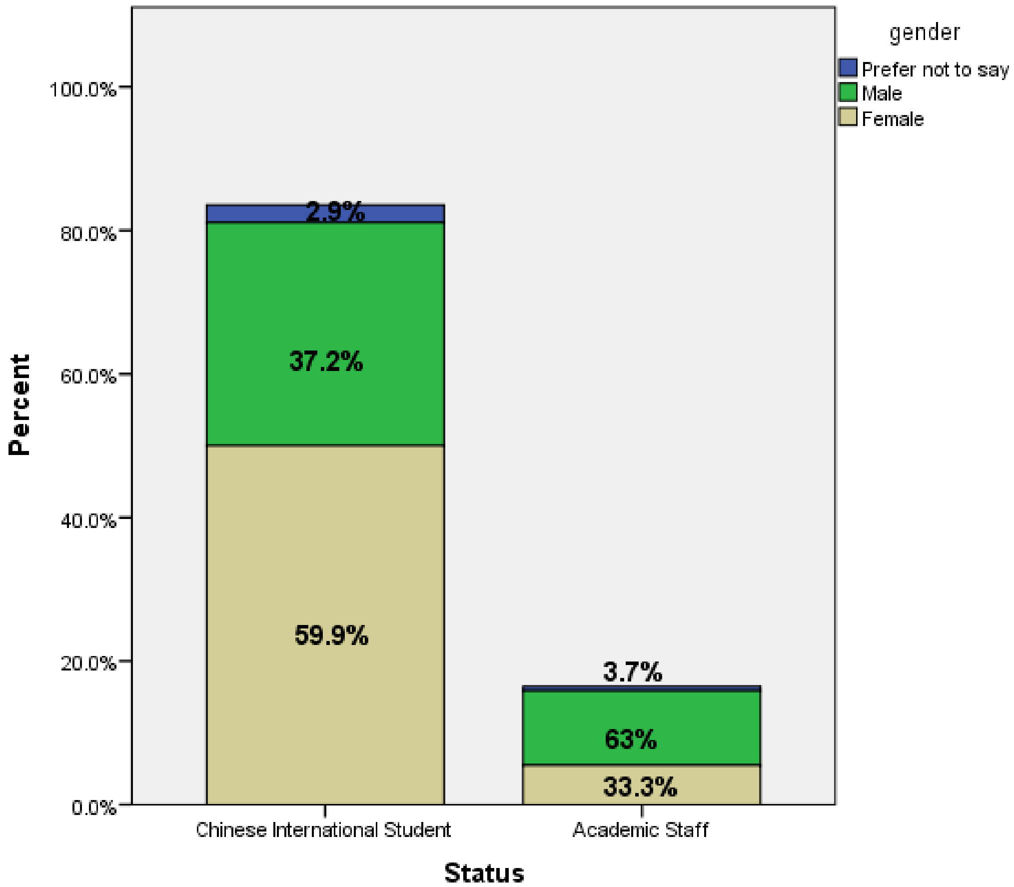


Figure 4.3: Gender information about the student and academic staff participant

The statistical analysis involved in this research comprised parametric tests requiring the normal distribution of the data (Field, 2009). For example, to investigate the differences between the *importance* and *performance* scores given by each individual, a set of t-tests were conducted. Muijs (2011) and Field (2009) suggest that the t-test is based on the assumption of normal distribution in the sampling distribution. Therefore, the assumption of normality should be checked in advance of performing appropriate statistical tests (e.g., t-tests). As an example, the procedure of inspecting normality in the mean I-P gap (i.e., SQ) scores is described here. It was carried out before comparing the differences between mean I scores and mean P scores. This procedure was consistently applied to the other measures collected by the questionnaire.

The histograms of I-P gap scores from the student-participants and the academic staff participants (Figure 4.3) and the corresponding P-P plots (Figure 4.3) were used to check visually if the distribution was normal. According to Field (2009), the closer the plotted graph is to the straight line, the closer the data distribution is to normality. For both groups of respondents of this research, the two histograms indicate that the distributions of the gap scores are close to being normal: they are approximately symmetrical and appear not to be too skewed. However, the distribution of the student-participants' SQ perceptions seems to be unimodal, which implies a little deviation from normality. According to the central limit theorem, in large samples (N>30 or 40), the sampling distribution tends to be normal, irrespective of the shape of the data (Elliott and Woodward, 2007; Field, 2009; Ghasemi and Zahediasl, 2012). This implies that with 139 students responding to the questionnaire, a slightly peaky distribution should not impede the use of parametric tests for the analysis of student-participants' SQ perceptions. When it comes to P-P plots, it shows that the observed I-P gap scores in each plot fall fairly close to the expected diagonal line (the straight line). Given the indications of both cases, it appears that service quality scores from the collected data are nearly normally distributed.

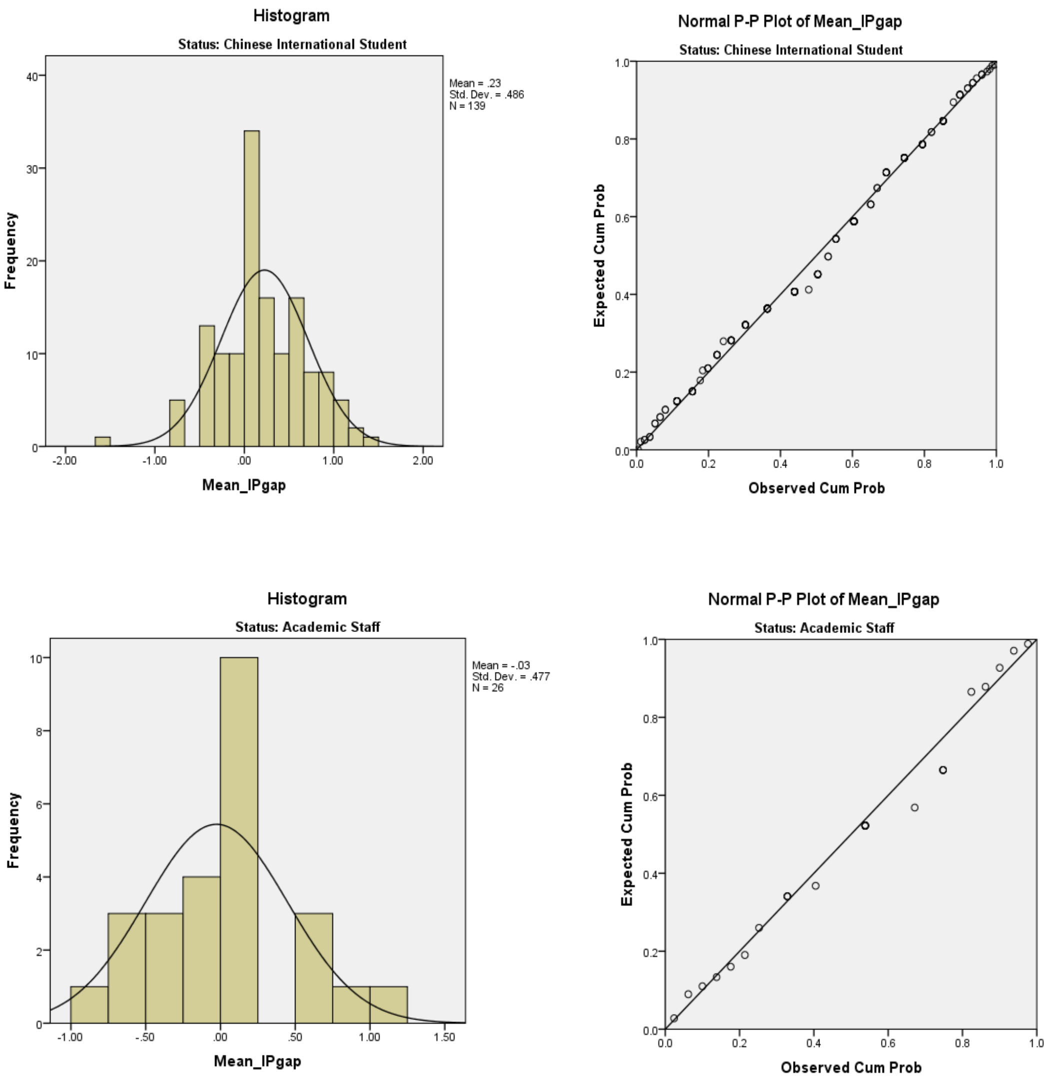


Figure 4.4: Histograms (left) and P-P plots (right) of the service quality scores given by the student and academic staff participants

4.1.2 Reliability and validity of the SQ scales

In advance of the analysis of quantitative data, it is worth re-examining the internal consistency of the service quality scale. In general, Cronbach's alpha, a measure of the internal consistency of a scale (Muijs, 2011), is 0.74 (in Table 4.2) for the 18 service quality items. Table 4.3 shows that both the importance and performance scales have a high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 and 0.85 respectively. George and Mallery (2003) suggest the following rules to interpret Cronbach's alpha coefficient: '> .9 – Excellent, > .8 – Good, > .7 – Acceptable, > .6 – Questionable, > .5 – Poor, and < .5 – Unacceptable' (p. 231). It implies that the SQ scales used in this research have acceptable to good internal reliability (Field, 2009; George and Mallery, 2003; Muijs, 2011).

Furthermore, concurrent validity was tested. In light of the literature, it is expected that service quality is related to the general level of satisfaction. By means of relating the I-P gaps to the level of respondents' satisfaction about the quality of HE, a statistically significant and negative correlation is found (r=-.29, p<.001) (Table 4.4). This suggests that a smaller I-P gap (i.e., a better service quality of HE provided by the university) is associated with a higher level of student satisfaction with that university.

Table 4.2: Reliability statistics for SQ questionnaire

	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
SQ (I-P)	.740	18

Table 4.3: Reliability statistics for Importance scale (left) and for Performance scale (right)

	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Importance	.815	18

	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Performance	.846	18

Table 4.4: Correlations between I-P Gap and participants' satisfaction about HE offered by their university

		Overall Satisfaction
SQ (I-P)	Pearson Correlation	-.292**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.1.3 Analysis for Research Question 1

In order to answer Research Question 1, a number of *t*-tests were conducted to test the following two hypotheses.

1. From the perspective of international students and academic staff at UK universities, what is service quality of the HE provided by the current university?

H 1: International students award higher 'importance' scores for the service quality of UK HE, and lower 'performance' scores for the HE offerings of their own university.

H2: UK academic staff award higher 'importance' scores for the service quality of UK HE, and lower 'performance' scores for the HE offerings of their own university.

4.1.3.1 Analysis of the general service quality of HE

According to the results in Table 4.5, the experiences of student-respondents at the university (M=3.78, SE=0.04), on average, are less than their expectations of UK HE (M=4.01, SE=0.04), t (138) = 5.44, $p_{(\text{one-tail})}$<0.001., r=.18. In the eyes of student-respondents, the general service quality of the HE provided by the university is less good than they had expected. This provides evidence to support H1.

However, the situation is different when the perspectives of academic staff participants are examined. There are no statistically significant differences between the importance and performance scores due to t (25) = -.31, $p_{(\text{one-tail})}$ >.05. This suggests that, on average, the performance of HE offerings by the investigated university matches the expectations of academic staff respondents. These findings lend limited evidence to H2.

One-way ANOVA was performed to further explore service quality of the university against gender and the study level of the students participating this research. As seen in the first table in Appendix F (Table AF.1), students, regardless of their study level, gave positive I-P difference scores (i.e., service quality was not as good as expected) to the HE offered by the university. Table AF.2 shows that student-participants' perceptions of service quality are not statistically different across study levels at the significance level of .05, F (3,133) = .45, p>.05. In general, these findings infer that the actual learning experience of the student group was less than their expectations, and this situation is not statistically different across the four levels of study. Similarly, gender has no effect on Chinese students' evaluation of HE provided by the university, F (2,134) = 0.85, p>.05 (Table 4.7).

The general level of service quality perceived by female and male academic staff was compared. As only one academic staff preferred not to reveal gender information, this category was not included in the test. Table AF.3 shows that the mean gap score evaluated by female academic staff (M_{I-P}=-0.30, SE=0.17) is significantly lower than that evaluated by male academic staff (M_{I-P}=0.14, SE=0.10), *t* (23) =2.36, *p*<.05, *r*=. 19. For female staff, the teaching experience at the university is greater than expectation, whereas it is the opposite for male staff. This implies that female staff tended to give a more positive evaluation of service quality of the HE provided by the university.

Table 4.5: Dependent t-test: results of comparing I and P scores within each group of participants

Participant Status			Mean	N	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Chinese international Student	Pair 1	Mean Importance	4.01	139	.04	5.44	138	.000
		Mean Performance	3.78	139	.04			
Academic Staff	Pair 1	Mean Importance	4.12	26	.07	-.31	25	.760
		Mean Performance	4.19	26	.08			

4.1.3.2 Analysis of service quality of HE attributes

Dependent t-tests were conducted to examine I-P gap of each HE attribute pair. There are 18 pairs of attributes in the service quality scale. Hence, in total 36 dependent t-tests were run to analyse student-participants' and staff-participants' perspectives about this matter. Field (2009) advises that a Type I error would increase with more t-tests carried out under the same experiment conditions. Given the large number of t-tests performed in this section, the Bonferroni correction (ibid.) was applied. It means that instead of adopting .05 as the critical value for significance for each test, a value of .0014 (.05/36) was used as a threshold in section 4.1.3.2.

According to Table 4.6, the perceived performance of two attributes (pair 12 and 17) of UK HE service matched the expectations of student-respondents. Chinese international students in this research perceived that the campus layout and appearance of their university (M=3.63, SE=.08) matched their expectations (M=3.76, SE=.08), *t* (138) =1.12, *p*=.265>.0014. Also, there is no statistically significant difference between students' expectation of having 'places on campus to relax during the day' (M=3.86, SE=.09) and their actual experiences in the current university (M=3.88, SE=.07), *t* (138) =-0.29, *p*=0.77>.0014.

Based on the perceptions of Chinese international students, the actual performance of their university was significantly better than what they had expected in advance, in terms of three attributes (pair 2, 6 and 10); hence, minus I-P differences were obtained for these attributes. The largest minus I-P gap lies in the actual availability of nearby pubs, clubs and bars (M=3.34, SE=.10) and its corresponding importance expected by Chinese students (M=2.42, SE=.10), *t* (138) = -6.96, *r*=.26. Having access to nearby sports and recreational facilities in reality (M=4.18, SE=0.07) was also beyond what student-participants expected to experience (M=3.91, SE=.08), *t* (138) =-2.57, *r*=.05. All these statistical values were significant at the level of .0014.

Nevertheless, the level of service quality of the remaining 13 attributes is less desirable than student-participants expected (statistically significant and positive I-P gap score), because they felt that their expectations of these aspects were not met by their actual corresponding experiences at the university. The widest and statistically significant gap resulted from the higher perceived importance (M=4.42, SE=.07), while lower perceived performance (M=3.52, SE=.08) in terms of teaching practice skills in courses run by the university (pair 5), *t* (138) =9.26, *p*<.0014, *r*=.38. The gap between students' expectations (M=4.06, SE=0.08) and their actual experiences (M=3.33, SE=0.09) regarding the provision of accommodation at a reasonable price (pair 8) was the second largest, *t* (138) =6.00, *p*<.001, *r*=.21. Whether the degree programme established by the university is actually reputable (M= 3.94, SE=.06) in student-participants' eyes also fell below the level expected (M=4.13, SE=.06), *t* (138) =2.57, *p*<.0014, *r*=0.05, yet this gap is the narrowest of the positive I-P gaps.

The results of the teacher-respondents' perceptions regarding service quality of attributes are summarised in Table 4.7. From the perspectives of academic staff respondents, there were 12 attributes receiving statistically non-significant I-P gap scores, with *p* values more than .0014. This suggests that the performance of most (66.7%) HE attributes lived up to the expectations of teacher-respondents. This figure is more than that (*N*=2) perceived by student-respondents.

The service quality of three attributes (pairs 2, 6, and 10) was even better, given the statistically significant and negative I-P differences (i.e., lower expectation and higher performance). The widest negative I-P gap was in the availability of nearby pubs, clubs and bars (pair 2) (M_I=2.70, SE=0.19; M_P= 4.33, SE=0.14), *t* (26) =-6.49, *p*<.001, *r*=.62. The second widest I-P gap as a consequence of higher mean performance (M=3.74, SE=0.19), while the lower mean expectation (M=4.56, SE=0.07) was regarding in the availability of nearby sports and recreational facilities (pair 6), *t* (26) =-3.70, *p*<.0014, *r*=.34. The perceptions of both student-respondents and academic staff respondents confirmed that the service quality of these two attributes at the university was as expected.

Three HE attributes (pairs 1, 15 and 18), as evaluated by academic staff, achieved a level of service quality lower than expected, in view of the statistically significant and positive I-P gaps. The widest positive gap related to having skilled and engaging teachers to teach on the course (pair 1) (M_I= 4.33, SE=0.12; M_P=3.34, SE=0.10), *t* (26) =4.19, *p*<.001, *r*=.40. Similarly, the actual experiences of student-participants in terms of these three attributes were below their corresponding expectations.

Table 4.6：Examples of paired samples statistics: SQ (scored by student-participants) of HE attributes

Status	Results		Attribute (I / P)	Mean	SE	t	df	Sig.
Student	I = P	Pair 12	attractive campus layout and appearance	3.76	.08	1.12	138	.265
			attractive campus layout and appearance	3.63	.08			
		Pair 17	places on campus to relax during the day	3.86	.09	-.29	138	.773
			places on campus to relax during the day	3.88	.07			
	I < P	Pair 2	nearby pubs clubs and bars	2.42	.10	-6.96	138	.000
			nearby pubs clubs and bars	3.34	.10			
		Pair 6	nearby sports and recreational facilities	3.91	.08	-2.57	138	.01
			nearby sports and recreational facilities	4.18	.07			
		Pair 10	cafes and social meeting places	3.79	.08	-6.65	137	.000
			cafes and social meeting places	4.37	.06			
	I > P	Pair 5	practical skills taught in courses	4.42	.07	9.26	138	.011
			practical skills taught in courses	3.52	.08			
		Pair 8	accommodation charged at a reasonable expense	4.06	.08	6.00	138	.000
			accommodation charged at a reasonable expense	3.33	.09			
		Pair 16	reputable degree programme	4.13	.06	2.57	138	.011
			reputable degree programme	3.94	.06			

Table 4.7：Examples of paired samples statistics: SQ (scored by staff participants) of HE attributes

Status			Attribute I / P	Mean	SE	t	df	Sig.
Staff	I < P	Pair 2	nearby pubs clubs and bars	2.70	.19	6.49	26	. 000
			nearby pubs clubs and bars	4.33	.14			
		Pair 6	nearby sports and recreational facilities	3.74	.19	-3.70	26	.001
			nearby sports and recreational facilities	4.56	.07			
	I > P	Pair 1	skilled and engaging teachers for courses	4.33	.12	4.19	26	.000
			skilled and engaging teachers for courses	3.34	.10			

4.1.3.3 Analysis of service quality of HE factors

In line with Angell et al. (2008), the 18 HE items were grouped into four factors: *academic, leisure, industry-link* and *cost.* Information on each factor and its component attributes is listed in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8: Four factors of HE SQ developed by Angell et al. (2008)

Factor	Factor Annotation	Component Attributes
Leisure	'the more general leisure service provided by the university'	Nearby pubs, clubs and bars
		Sports and recreational facilities
		Cafes and social meeting places
		Attractive campus layout and appearance
		Opportunities for meeting fellow students
		Places on campus to relax during the day
Academic	'the general academic service attributes provided by the university'	Skilled and engaging teachers
		Practical skills taught
		Regular access to teaching staff
		Variety of library books and journals
		Easily transferable skills
		Reputable degree programme
		Good computing and web facilities
Industry Link	'the help students receive in making links with industry'	industry contacts provided by tutors
		A helpful career service
Cost	'the issue of cost and value'	Tuition fees at a reasonable expense
		Accommodation charged at a reasonable rate
		Module variety offers good value

According to Field (2009), repeated measures ANOVA are suitable for situations where scores taken in different conditions are likely to be related, due to being awarded by the same participant. In the context of this study, the same participants provided their perceptions concerning the service quality of the four different factors of HE. As a result, repeated measures ANOVA was used to compare the mean service quality across the four factors. The assumption of *sphericity* underpins this test, meaning that 'the variance of the differences between conditions are equal' (ibid., p.460). To test this assumption, Mauchly's test in SPSS is usually performed. If the results of the test are statistically significant, the assumption has not been met. Under such circumstances, corrections can be applied to provide a valid *F*-ratio, for which the Greenhouse-Geisser (ε) test is one of the most widely used. Field further suggests that multivariate test results can be used when the assumption of sphericity in the collected data is violated, because they do not depend on that assumption. In most situations, Pillai's Trace (V) from multivariate test results is reported.

Based on the perspectives of Chinese student-respondents, the results of Mauchly's test in Table AF.4 indicates that the assumption of sphericity has been violated, X^2 (5) = 33.55, $p<.05$. As a result, multivariate tests (Table 4.9) are reported (ε =.88). The results of Pillai's Trace show that the level of service quality, according to Chinese international students' perceptions, differs significantly across the four factors of UK HE, V=.482, F (3,136) =42.23, p<0.001, multivariate partial eta squared =.48. According to the commonly used threshold (Pallant, 2016) (.01=small, .06=moderate, .14=large effect), this partial eta squared result indicates a very large effect size.

More specifically, Table AF.5 shows that the mean I-P gap of leisure factor (M= -.25, SD=.72) is lower than that of the academic factors (M=.45, SD=.54), of the industry-link factor (M = .30, SD=.83) and of the cost factor (M=.60, SD=.91), and that all the differences are statistically significant (p<0.001). This indicates that, in student-participants' minds, the highest level of service quality of HE offered by their university is in terms of the leisure factor. Meanwhile, there was a statistically significant difference between the I-P gap of the cost factor and that of the industry-link factor (p<0.01), with the gap of the former being wider than that of the latter. This suggests that the industry-link factor received a relatively better service quality evaluation from the student group.

Actually, the results of paired t-tests presented in Table AF.6 confirm that only the leisure factor (Factor 1) was deemed by student respondents to achieved a negative I-P gap – they experienced more than they had expected – at a statistically significant level, t (138) = -4.05, p<.001, r=.11. Conversely, the service quality of the other three factors is less desirable than expected by student-participants, given positive I-P gaps with all p values less than the value of 0.001.

When it comes to the perceptions of academic staff participants, Table AF.4 shows that the assumption of sphericity was not been violated, X^2 (5) =5.07, p>.05. The main ANOVA results are thus reported. Table 4.10 indicates that the evaluations of academic staff differ significantly across the four service quality factors, F (3, 75) =7.84, p<.001, partial eta square = .24.

A closer look at the results of pairwise comparisons (Table AF.7) reveals that the mean I-P gap score of the leisure factor (M=-0.52, SD=.76) was significantly narrower than that of the academic factor (M=0.29, SD=.44, p<.001) and that of the cost factor (M=0.28, SD=1.02 p<.01). It means that the service quality of the leisure factor at the university was significantly higher than that of the other two factors, from the perspective of the student-participants.

In general (Table 4.11), the service quality of the leisure, industry-link and cost factors in the investigated university is as good as expected by staff-participants, because their expectations of these factors were satisfied by their related experiences at the university (either due to p>.05 for the industry-link and cost factors or a negative and statistically significant service quality score for the leisure factor, t (25) =-3.43 p<.05, r=.36). However, the academic-related factor was perceived by academic participants to have a service quality that was lower than their expectations (M_{I-P} = 0.29, t (25) =3.35, p<.05, r=.31).

Table 4.9: Multivariate tests: student-participants' perceptions of SQ against four factors of HE

Status	Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Student	Pillai's Trace	.482	42.232	3	136	.000	.482

Table 4.10: Tests of within-subjects effects: staff participants' perceptions of SQ against four factors of HE

Status	Source		df	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Academic Staff	SQ	Sphericity Assumed	3	7.837	.000	.239

Table 4.11: SQ (scored by academic participants) for each factor of higher education

	I-P Gap	(Mean SQ)	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Factor 1	Leisure	-.52	-3.43	25	.002
Factor 2	Academic	.29	3.35	25	.000
Factor 3	IndustryLink	-.05	-.578	25	.569
Factor 4	Cost	.28	1.38	25	.180

4.1.3.4 Analysis of importance of HE factors

Repeated measures ANOVA were also used to explore whether the importance score is different across the four factors of service quality of UK HE.

As presented in Table AF.8, Mauchly's test indicates that the assumption of sphericity has been violated in Chinese international students' perceptions, X^2 (5) = 49.13, $p<.05$, therefore the results of multivariate tests (Table 4.12) are reported (ε=.85). The results show that the level of perceived importance, in the views of the student-respondents, was affected by the type of factors of HE service, V=0.60, F (3,136) = 66.96, $p<.001$, multivariate partial eta squared =.60.

A further inspection of post-hoc tests (Table AF.9) confirms that the importance of the academic factor (M=4.33, SD=.47), as perceived by Chinese students-participants, was higher than that for the leisure factor (M=3.62, SD=.63), the industry-link factor (M=3.95, SD=.67) and the cost factor (M=4.08, SD=.64). The most important role of the academic factor for the quality of UK HE service was significant at the .001 level.

By contrast, the leisure factor was deemed the least important when it was compared by student-participants to the other three factors comprising HE service. Significance values of less than 0.001 were obtained for all pair comparisons. Comparing the respective importance of the industry-link factor and of the cost factor, there was no statistically significant difference (p=.283 >.05).

In summary, Chinese international students perceived that the academic factor is the most important for UK HE service, while the leisure factor is of the least importance. The cost and industry-link factors are in the middle, with one having no statistically significant difference from the other.

When it comes to the evaluations by academic staff respondents, Mauchly's test (Table AF.8) indicates that the assumption of sphericity has been violated, X^2 (5) = 11.86, *p*<.05, therefore the results of multivariate tests (Table 4.12) are reported (ε=.75). The results of Pillai's Trace displayed that the level of importance perceived by academic staff was also affected by the type of factor of HE service, V=0.80, *F* (3, 23) = 31.03, *p*<.001, multivariate partial eta squared =.80.

Table AF.9 reveals that the mean importance of academic factor (M=4.60, SD=0.38) was significantly more salient than that of the other three ($M_{Imp\text{-}Leisure}$ = 3.78, SD=0.51; $M_{Imp\text{-}indusry}$ = 3.87, SE=0.67; $M_{Imp\text{-}Cost}$ = 4.07, SE=0.57), with all *p* values <.001. It means that the academic-related aspect was considered by the staff group to be the most important component of UK HE. The importance of the other three factors did not differ to a statistically significant degree.

Similar to the level of service quality against gender and study level (section 4.1.3.1), the importance score given by student-participants was affected neither by study level (*F* (3,133) = .060, *p*=.618>.05) (Table 4.13) nor gender (*F* (2, 134) =.79, *p*>.05) (Table 4.14). This indicates that the levels of importance of four HE factors were not significantly different among students of different study levels or contrasting gender. For academic staff (Table 4.14), gender had no statistically significant impact on their importance scores (*F* (2, 23) = 2.11, *p*>.05).

Table 4.12: Multivariate tests: Student- and staff-participants' perceptions of Importance against four factors of HE

Status	Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Student	Importance	Pillai's Trace	.60	66.96	3.000	136.000	.000	.596
Academic Staff	Importance	Pillai's Trace	.80	31.03	3.000	23.000	.000	.802

Table 4.13: Results of one-way ANOVA: Mean importance (to student-participants) against study level

	df	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3	.60	.618
Within Groups	133		

Table 4.14： Results of one-way ANOVA: Mean importance (to student- and staff-participants) against gender

Status		df	F	Sig.
Student	Between Groups	2	.79	.458
	Within Groups	134		
Academic Staff	Between Groups	2	2.11	.144
	Within Groups	23		

4.1.3.5. Summary of Research Question 1

- Service quality from the perspectives of Chinese international students:

There is considerable evidence in the perspectives of Chinese student-participants to support *Hypothesis 1: International students award higher 'importance' scores for the service quality of UK HE, and lower 'performance' scores for the HE offerings of their own university.*

In terms of the general quality of HE service offered by the university concerned, students, regardless of their gender and study level, scored a statistically significant and positive I-P gap – their actual learning experiences in the university were less than their expectations.

A more nuanced analysis reveals that, of the 18 HE attributes, only five achieved the expected level of service quality; that is, the actual experiences gained by student-participants regarding these five attributes at their host university matched or went beyond their expectations.

Hypothesis 1 was also supported at a factorial level. When examining service quality in relation to the four factors of UK HE, the leisure factor was found to achieve a significantly better service quality than the others. Student-respondents experienced more than they expected in terms of the leisure factor in their current university, whereas the situation was opposite for the academic, industry-link and cost factors. However, leisure was deemed by student-participants as the least important factor in UK HE. The service quality of the academic factor at the university was neither up to the students' expected level (i.e. it received statistically significant and positive I-P score) nor significantly better than that of any other factor, despite students, independent of their gender and study level, attaching the uttermost importance to it. The industry-link factor and the cost factor were equally important for the recruited students.

- Service quality from the perspectives of academic staff of the UK university

The perceptions of academic staff-participants provided enormous support to reject *Hypothesis 2: UK academic staff award higher 'importance' scores for the service quality of UK HE, and lower 'performance' scores for the HE offerings of their own university.*

In general, there is no statistically significant difference between the expectations of academic staff and their actual experiences in the current university. In other words, the HE experience gained by the academic respondents was as good as they had expected. The service quality of HE offered by the university was higher for females than for males.

The above-mentioned findings were also noticeable in the results of the attribute analysis. The mean performance of altogether 15 attributes either matched or exceeded what staff had expected. The university attained the highest service quality in terms of providing nearby pubs, clubs and bars. By contrast, staff-participants felt that the least desirable service quality of the educational offering of their university was ‘having skilled and engaging teachers to teach the course’.

When the four factors were taken into account, the results show that all apart from the academic factor were awarded either statistically non-significant or significantly negative I-P scores; hence, their service quality was perceived to be as high as expected by staff-participants. The service quality of the leisure factor was superior, to a statistically significant extent, to the academic and the cost factors. Independent of gender, academic staff deemed the academic factor as the most vital aspect of UK HE, although service quality was considered lower than their expectations. In contrast, the mean importance was equal across the three factors.

- Key findings to be further explored in qualitative data

Investigations into Research Question 1 offered many important and interesting findings. However, several key findings are worth further exploration through qualitative data so that deeper insights may be gained. What to be explored further are: 1) Why student-respondents thought that the service quality of the HE provided by their university is less desirable than the level that they expected; 2) Why both groups of participants perceived the academic factor to be the most important factor in HE service quality; and 3) Do participants’ main concerns, expressed in individual interviews, support the most important role played by the academic factor?

4.1.4 Analysis for Research Question 2

2. Are teachers’ and international students’ perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university significantly different from one another?

In order to answer Research Question 2, the following hypothesis was tested:

*H*3: *There are significant differences between the service quality of UK HE as perceived by international students and by UK academic staff.*

4.1.4.1 Comparison of the general level of service quality

As presented in Table 4.15, the mean I-P gap scored by the student-respondents (M=0.23, SE=0.04) was significantly wider than that scored by academic staff (M=-0.03, SE=0.09), $t\ (163) = 2.43$, $p<.05$, $r=.03$. This suggests that, in relation to their student counterparts, academic staff tend to be more positive in their evaluation of the service quality of HE offered by their university. This finding provides support for the H3.

Table 4.15: Statistics of independent samples test: Comparison of SQ between student and staff participants

	Status	Mean	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
SQ	Student	.23	.04	2.43	163	.016
	Academic Staff	-.03	.09			

4.1.4.2 Comparison of service quality among HE factors

In order to inspect the differences in more detail, the service quality of the four HE factors was compared between the two groups of participants (Table 4.16). There was no statistically significant difference in service quality for either the (t (163) =1.44, p>.05) or the cost factor (t (163) =1.63, p>.05). Combined with the results in section 4.1.3.3, it could be inferred that experiences of student- and staff-participants relating to the academic factor were below their expectations to a similar degree.

On the other hand, both groups' experiences in the university regarding the leisure factor outperformed their expectations. For academic staff, the service quality of the leisure factor (M=-.52, SE=.15) was significantly better, t (163) =1.74, $p_{(one\text{-}tail)} < .05$, r=.02. When it comes to the industry factor, the evaluation by academics (M=-0.06, SE=0.17) was more significantly positive than that of by students (M=0.30, SE=0.07), t (163) =1.96, $p_{(one\text{-}tail)}<.05$, r=.02. While the student-respondents felt negative about the provision of industry contact from the university, their academic counterparts appraised it as the opposite. These results further support for H3.

Table 4.16 Statistics of independent samples test: Comparison of SQ of HE factors (scored by student and staff participants)

Factor	Status	Mean	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
cost	Student	.60	.08	1.63	163	.105
	Academic Staff	.28	.20			
leisure	Student	-.25	.06	1.74	163	.084
	Academic Staff	-.52	.15			
academic	Student	.45	.05	1.44	163	.152
	Academic Staff	.29	.09			
Industry link	Student	.30	.07	1.96	163	.051
	Academic Staff	-.06	.17			

4.1.4.3 Comparison of the IP matrix

Each of the four factors of HE service was examined by adopting IPA. It is worth noting that the value of yielding an IPA matrix is to display the relative, rather than the absolute, degrees of importance and performance (Martilla and James, 1977). For this research, two IP matrixes (Figures 4.5 and 4.6) were produced to exhibit separately the perceptions of students and academic staff about the positioning of each factor. The vertical axis represents the level of performance of the university perceived by the participants, while the horizontal stands for the level of importance valued by them.

Apart from the cost factor, the student- and staff-respondents allocated similar sections to three HE factors. To be specific, the academic factor fell into the *Keep up the Good Work* quadrant, due to its highest importance and highest performance in relation to other factors. By contrast, it was perceived that the university has put excessive effort into the leisure factor, which was of the least of importance; hence, it was located in the fourth section – *Possible Overkill*. The position of the industry-link factor fell into the *Low Priority* section. The difference of student and teacher perceptions was clearly manifest in the cost factor – it was placed into the *Concentrate Here* quadrant by students, yet nearly in the *Low Priority* quadrant by academics.

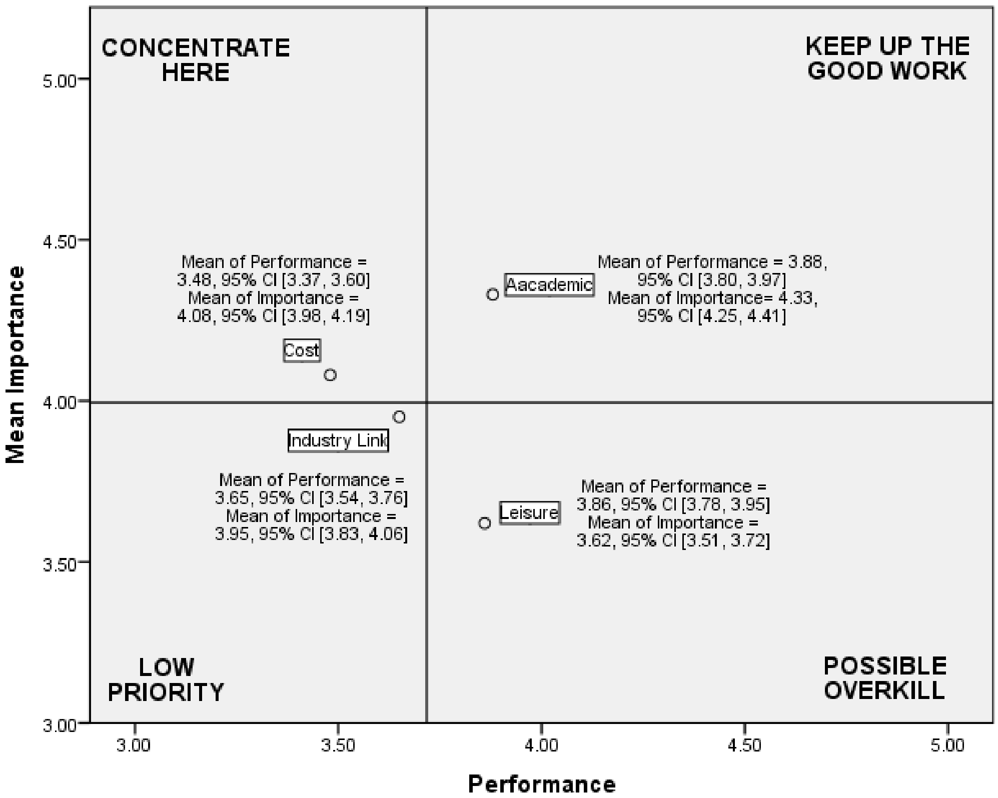


Figure 4.5：Student-participants' perceptions

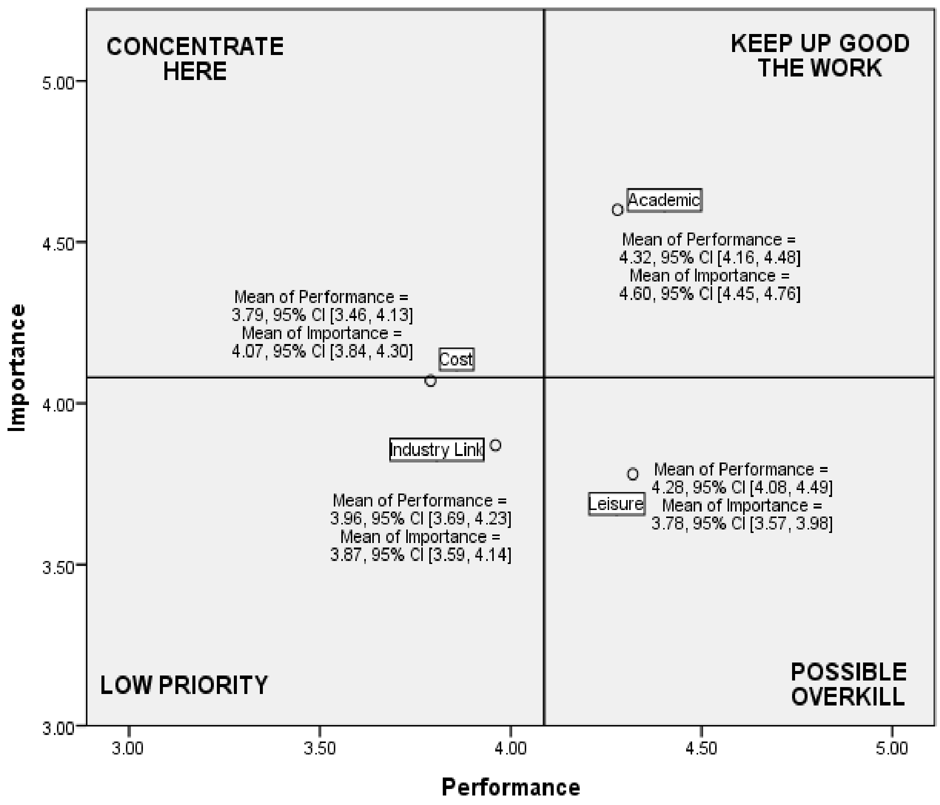


Figure 4.6: Staff-participants' perceptions

4.1.4.4 Comparison of importance scores of four HE factors

As the results in section 4.1.3.4 show, both student- and teacher-participants' perceptions were significantly different across the four HE factors. Further pairwise comparisons in Table 4.17 reveal that both groups of participants attached the utmost importance to the academic factor of HE service quality, with all *p* values<.001. However, the importance of the academic factor was dissimilar. Table 4.26 shows that Chinese students (M=4.33, SE=0.04) had significantly lower expectations of academic service than academic staff (M=4.60, SE=0.07), *t* (163) = -2.77, *p*<.05, *r*=.04.

Student-participants felt that the leisure factor was of relatively low importance in a high-quality HE service. Similarly, in the opinion of the teacher-participants, the importance of the leisure factor was not significantly greater than the other factors.

Table 4.17: Statistics of independent samples test: Comparison of importance scored by student- and staff-participants (regarding HE factors)

Factor	Status	Mean	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
academic	Student	4.33	.04	-2.77	163	.006
	Academic Staff	4.60	.07			
leisure	Student	3.62	.05	-1.22	163	.223
	Academic Staff	3.78	.10			
industry link	Student	3.95	.06	.56	163	.575
	Academic Staff	3.87	.13			
cost	Student	4.08	.05	.10	163	.921
	Academic Staff	4.07	.11			

Table 4.18: Summary of student and teacher perspectives about HE attributes

Attribute	SQ as desirable as expected		SQ not as desirable as expected
	Match (non-sig I-P gap)	Lower I and higher P (negative and sig I-P gap)	Higher I and lower P (positive and sig I-P gap)
1. Skilled and engaged teachers for courses			✓*
2. Nearby pubs, clubs and bars		✓*	
3. industry contacts provided by tutors	*		✓
4. Tuition fees at reasonable expense	*		✓
5. Practical skills taught in courses	*		✓
6. Nearby sports and recreational facilities		✓*	
7. Helpful career service – helpful career service	*		✓
8. Accommodation charged at a reasonable expense	*		✓
9. Regular access to teaching staff	*		✓
10. Cafes and social meeting places	*	✓	
11. A variety of library books and journals	*		✓
12. Attractive campus layout and appearance	✓*		
13. Module variety that offers good value	*		✓
14. Easily transferable skills taught	*		✓
15. Opportunities for meeting fellow students			✓*
16. Reputable degree programme	*		✓
17. Places on campus to relax during the day	✓		
18. Good computing and web facilities			✓*

(Note: Student perception: '✓'; Teacher perception: '*')

4.1.4.5 Summary of Research Question 2

Incorporating section 4.1.3, the results of the second research question could be summarised as follows:

- There is ample evidence to support Hypothesis 3*: There are statistically significant differences between service quality of UK HE as perceived by international students and by UK academic staff. The* evidence is displayed in the analysis at various levels.

- At the general level of service quality, compared to Chinese students, academic staff gave more positive feedback about the HE provided by their university. This is reinforced by the results from the attribute analysis. While only 27.8 per cent of the 18 attributes achieved the expected service quality in the eyes of student-respondents, from the perspective of academic staff the figure is nearly triple. Only six attributes received consistent student- and staff-evaluations (with both ✓ and * in Table 4.18).
- At the factorial level, there are differences between the perceptions of the two types of participants. Although the service quality of the leisure factor came up to expectation for both students and teachers, the actual experience of the staff was significantly better than expected. Whereas the academics felt positive about their actual experiences of the industry-link factor in relation to expectations, students did not. Hence, the service quality of these two aspects was significantly higher from the perspective of the academic group.

  There was no statistically significant difference in the evaluation of service quality of the academic factor: it was equally undesirable for both groups of participants, given their perception that their actual experiences at the university were significantly lower than their expectations. Compared to the students, staff-participants attached a higher level of importance to the academic factor. Both groups, however, felt that the academic factor contributes the most to a quality HE service, if compared to the other three factors. On the other hand, they both diminished the importance of the leisure factor. This factor was awarded the lowest importance score by student-participants.
- The IP matrix graphically shows the relative positions of four individual HE factors. The difference between student and staff perceptions is represented by the different locations of the cost factor: while the former considered that this was worth concentrating on in future, the latter gave it low priority. However, the two groups put the other three HE factors in similar sections. Specifically, they placed the academic factor into the *Keep up the Good Work* quadrant, the industry-link factor into *Low Priority* quadrant and the leisure factor into the *Possible Overkill* quadrant.
- This section presents the results regarding comparisons between student- and staff-participants' perceptions of service quality. It would be worth looking for more detail in the qualitative data about the key findings as summarised above: 1) Where do the differences between the two groups of participants' service quality perceptions lie; and 2) Both groups of participants rated the academic factor as the most important one in relation to the other three HE factors. In this case, do they share similar understandings regarding what contribute the most to the quality of the academic factor?

4.1.5 Analysis for Research Question 3

3. What is the change pattern (if any) in international students' and teachers' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university after accumulating experience of participation in UK HE over time?

4.1.5.1 Perspectives of Chinese international students

In U-curve theory (Lysgaard, 1955), the length of stay in the host country is divided into three categories: 0–6 months; 7–18 months; and 19 months and above. However, Lysgaard provided no theoretical foundation to justify his approach and did not conduct statistical tests to verify the differences between groups (Ward et al. 1998). This further proves the value of this research, which attempts to re-examine the U-curve theory in a new context. Subsequent studies in the literature adopted varied strategies to divide participants' stay in the host country, without offering sufficient explanations about those strategies (e.g., Chang, 1973; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963; Nash, 1991). Given that the literature review did not help the researcher of this study make decisions about how to group the student respondents based on their length of stay in the UK, she gave some consideration to the statistical perspective.

In this study the first category was further split into two: 0–3 months and 4–6 months. Two reasons underpin this action. The first is that the number of those whose learning experiences in UK HE fell into the 0–6 category occupied 55.2 per cent of the total number of student-respondents (as shown in Figure 4.7). The value of three months is the closest to the first quartile. The values of six months and 18 months are respectively closest to the second and third quartile. As a result, the number of respondents in each time series is more balanced by adding a range of 0–3 months. As Field (2009) and Wilcox (2005) noted, equal sample sizes across groups can increase the accuracy of *F*-test or ANOVA in terms of making the Type I error rate lower. Moreover, *F*-test is based on the assumption that the distribution of outcome variables (i.e., intercultural adjustment in this case) is normal (Blanca et al., 2017; Field, 2009; Wilcox, 2005). The data in reality, especially in educational and psychological research, are often not normally distributed (Cohen, et al., 2007; 2011). In this study, a beforehand examination of the student respondents' intercultural adjustment indicated that the data is close to normality. Assigning the balanced number of participants to each group helps maintain the robustness of *F*-test by making it less sensitive to slight or even moderate departure from normality (Blanca et al., 2017; Winer et al., 1991).

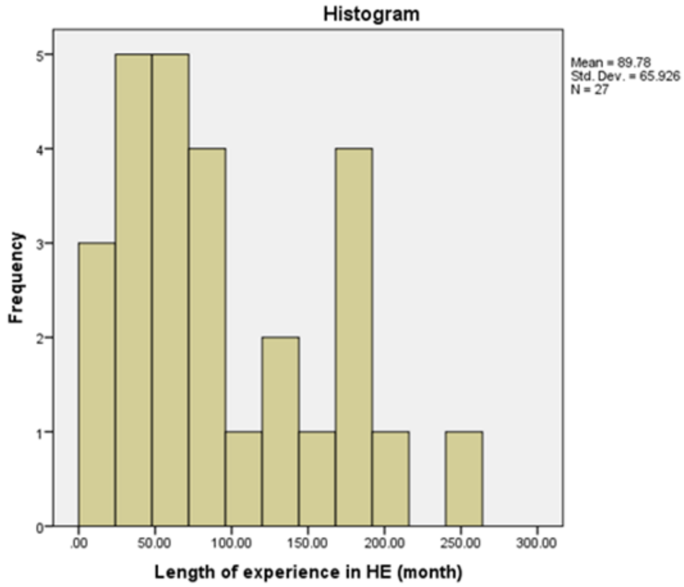
Apart from this statistical reason, the theoretical rationale is that the time of academic year plays a critical role in the intercultural adjustment of international students (Selby and Woods, 1966). Usually representing the end of the first academic semester, the third month is expected to exert a unique influence on students' evaluation of service quality of HE and their adjustment to the United Kingdom; thus, a new '0–3 months' category was added.

According to Table 4.19, there is no statistically significant quadratic trend between service quality and length of experience categories, F (1, 135) = 0.03, p>.05. In addition, post-hoc tests confirmed that service quality perceptions were not significantly different between any two time series, with all p values >.05. These results indicate that no curvilinear pattern could be identified in the change of student-participants' service quality perceptions, when considering the effects of the length of their learning experiences in UK HE. Therefore, the collected data cannot support any statistically significant curvilinear pattern presented by the changes in students' service quality perceptions.

4.1.5.2 The perspectives of academic staff

Unlike student-respondents, participating academic staff tended to have long experience in UK HE (M=89.78, SD=65.93), as shown in Figure 4.7. Therefore, the length of academic respondents' teaching experience in UK HE was re-coded with a measuring unit of *year*. To the best of my knowledge, no existing study has related the length of teachers' HE experience to their perceptions of HE service quality. In this case, the length of teaching experiences was tentatively divided into four categories based on its quartile: 0–3 years; 4–5 years; 6–10 years; and 10 years and more.

Similar to the results on student perspectives, changes in academic staff's perceptions on HE service quality cannot be presented by a quadratic trend with time (Table 4.20), F(1, 22) =1.84, p>.05. This indicates that, as staff-participants accumulate teaching experience in UK HE, their service quality perceptions do not display any curvilinear pattern.



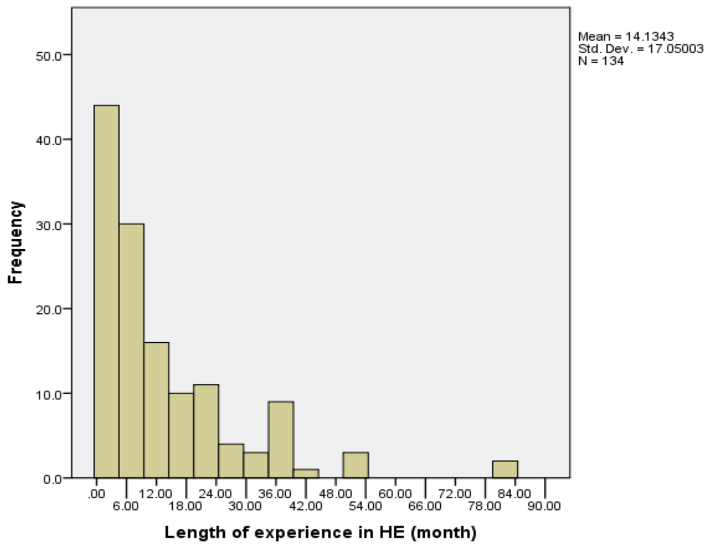


Figure 4.7: Length of student participants' learning experience in UK HE (above) and length of staff participants' experience of teaching Chinese students in UK HE (below)

Table 4.19: ANOVA: the change of SQ (scored by student-participants) with the length of their learning experiences in UK HE

		df	Within Groups	F	Sig.
Quadratic Term	Unweighted	1	135	.03	.872

Table 4.20: ANOVA: the change of SQ (scored by staff participants) with the length of their teaching experience in UK HE

		df	Within Groups	F	Sig.
Quadratic Term	Unweighted	1	22	1.84	.189

4.1.6 Analysis for Research Question 6

6. Is there any statistically significant relationship between international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by their university and their perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom?

In order to address Research Question 6, the following hypothesis was tested:

H5: *For international students, there is a positive correlation between their self-evaluated intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom and their perception of the service quality of HE provided by their host university.*

4.1.6.1. Intercultural adjustment of Chinese international students

As presented in Table 4.21, all student-respondents (N=139) completed the intercultural adjustment scales. The mean self-evaluated intercultural adjustment is 3.70, SD=0.43. When compared sociocultural adjustment with psychological adjustment, the latter (M=3.74, SE=0.51) is significantly higher than the former (M=3.66, SE=0.46), t (138) = -1.97, $p_{\text{(one-tailed)}} < .05$, r=.03.

When combining intercultural adjustment with the study level of respondents (Table AF.10), it was found that Master's students achieved the highest level (M=3.76, SE=0.05). However, intercultural adjustment for students registered with other types of study is the lowest (M=3.11, SE=0.10). Male students (M=3.79, SE= 0.06) appeared to adjust better than either female students (M=3.64, SE=0.06) or students preferring not indicate gender information (M=3.79, SE=0.29).

Nevertheless, comparing the results from ANOVA (Table AF.11) shows that none of above differences were significant at the significance level of .05. It means that student-participants' self-perceived intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom is similar across the three investigated gender categories and the four study levels.

Table 4.22 shows that sociocultural adjustment has a significantly positive correlation with psychological adjustment, r = .56, p<.01. In addition, the average level of intercultural adjustment is (statistically) significantly related to sociocultural adjustment, r = .87 and psychological adjustment r = .89 (with p <.01 for both correlations).

4.1.6.2 The relationship between intercultural adjustment and service quality

As seen in Table 4.22, there is no statistically significant correlation between service quality and intercultural adjustment. It suggests that student-participants' evaluations of the quality of HE service provided by the host university are not significantly related to their self-evaluated intercultural adjustment. However, the relationship between the I-P gap of the academic factor and sociocultural adjustment is statistically significant, $r=-.18$, $p<.05$. As the I-P gap of the academic factor decreases, the level of student-participants' sociocultural adjustment to the United Kingdom increases. This implies that an enhanced service quality of the academic factor at the investigated university is associated with better adjustment of student-participants to the UK sociocultural aspects. Nevertheless, the magnitude of such association is weak. Psychological adjustment of student-participants is not significantly connected to the service quality of the academic factor ($p>.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 7 was only partially supported.

Table 4.21: Paired samples test: Comparing student-participants' sociocultural adjustment with their psychological adjustment

	N	Mean	SE	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Socio_Ad	139	3.66	.46	.46	-1.97	138	.051
Psychol_Ad	139	3.74	.51	.51			

Table 4.22: Correlations between student-participants' SQ perceptions and their self-evaluated intercultural adjustment

		Ad	Socio_Ad	Psychol_Ad
SQ	Pearson Correlation	-.08	-.06	-.07
SQ of academic factor	Pearson Correlation	-.16	-.18*	-.05
Ad	Pearson Correlation		.87**	.89**
Socio Ad	Pearson Correlation			.56**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.1.6.3 Summary

In summary, the results for Research Question 6 are as below:

- The data collected failed to provide full support for Hypothesis 7 that, *For international students, there is a positive correlation between their self-evaluated intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom and their perception of the service quality of HE provided by their host university.* Based on collected data, no statistically significant relationship could be identified between student-respondents' perceptions of service quality of HE offered by the host university and their self-evaluation of intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom.
- However, sociocultural adjustment was found to have a statistically significant yet weak relationship with service quality of the academic factor of HE.

- In general, the degree of psychological adjustment achieved by student-respondents is significantly higher than that of sociocultural adjustment.
- Psychological adjustment is closely related to sociocultural adjustment. The magnitude of the relationship between intercultural adjustment and each of its two components (i.e. sociocultural adjustment and psychological adjustment) is significantly high.
- It would be informative to explore further the qualitative data on why or how sociocultural adjustment and service quality of the academic factor were perceived to be linked.

4.1.7 Analysis for Research Question 7

7. What is the change pattern (if any) in the student perception on their intercultural adjustment to the UK, with them accumulating participating experiences in UK HE over time?

In order to address Research Question 7, the following hypothesis was tested:

H4: *With international students obtaining more learning experiences in UK HE over time, the changes in their self-evaluated intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom display a U-curve pattern.*

Figure 4.8 shows a line chart depicting the changes in student-participants' self-evaluated intercultural adjustment as they accumulate learning experience in UK HE. The line seems to suggest a curvilinear trend – an upside-down U curve, a shape opposite to that in H7. Subsequently, one-way ANOVA was conducted to verify this trend. According to Table 4.23, the mean of student-participants' self-reported intercultural adjustment could not be represented by a quadratic curve that is statistically significant, $F(1, 135) = 3.11$, $p > .05$. In this case, neither the identified upside-down U-curve nor the hypothesised U curve could be supported by the collected data.

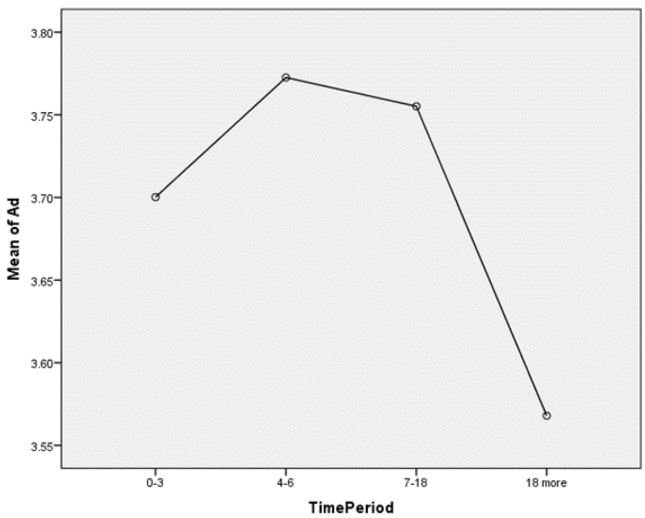


Figure 4.8: Change pattern of student-participants' self-perceived intercultural adjustment with the length of their learning experience in UK HE

Table 4.23: Comparing student-participants' intercultural adjustment against the length of their learning experience in UK HE

		df	Within Groups	F	Sig.
Quadratic Term	Unweighted	1	135	3.114	.080

4.2 Analysis of qualitative data

4.2.1 Profiles of the interviewees

In total, the qualitative phase involved 11 interviewees who also responded to the questionnaire at the quantitative phase. They consisted of five Chinese international students and six academic staff from the investigated university. four student interviewees were postgraduate taught students at a business school, while one was a postgraduate research student of the social sciences school. Of the student interviewees, four were females and one male. The academic staff interviewees were from two particular schools of the investigated university: four from the business school and two from Winchester School of Art. These schools are the most popular schools of the university, accommodating a considerable number of Chinese international students (University of Southampton, 2015). The numbers of male and female academic staff interviewees were equal. Five of the six academics were teaching fellows at the university at the time when individual interviews were conducted.

4.2.2 Research Question 4

4. From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how can a high quality of HE service be provided by universities in the United Kingdom?

4.2.2.1 Perspectives of Chinese international students

It has been found in the quantitative analysis that student-participants perceived the academic-related factor to be the most important aspect for service quality of UK HE that is as good as they expected. The semi-structured interviews with Chinese international students echoed and provided detailed insights into this result. When asked about how UK universities could offer quality HE service, all concerned themselves almost exclusively with aspects influencing their academic life, with the exception that the merged theme of *career support* is more relevant to the industry-link factor.

On the other hand, the leisure factor was deemed to be the least important aspect for service quality of UK HE, according to the quantitative data collected from students. This finding seems to be reflected in the follow-up interviews as well, as none of the student interviewees' comments on Research Question 4 pertained to the available leisure facilities.

Teacher quality

Four student-participants regarded the quality of teaching staff as the most important aspect for UK universities to provide quality HE to students, especially to Chinese international students. This emerged theme helps to understand why student-participants gave the highest importance scores to the academic factor. However, it would also be interesting to discover from the teacher interviewees' perspectives the following: where the importance of the academic factor mainly resides; and whether the two groups of interviewees share similar expectations of the quality of teachers.

I think the most important aspect is the teacher of our university. (Student-participant 1)

First of all, it is the teacher quality of a university. It is the most important factor. Based on my learning experiences till now as a Master students, the teachers play a key role. (Student-participant 3)

I pay a lot of attention to teachers. Because I feel that they can, no matter through their specialised knowledge or their personal values, influence students unconsciously. (Student-participant 5)

For two students, teacher quality was tightly bound up with how professional the academics are. Professionalism first manifests in teachers' educational qualifications and their academic competence. The student-participants expected academic staff of UK universities to possess a doctor degree and to be academically competent:

I think all the teachers need to have the doctor degree. The teachers have high academic competence. (Student-participant 2)

It (teacher quality) includes academic qualifications and competence of the teacher. (Student-participant 3)

One student compared the quality of HE in the United Kingdom and China. She gave a more positive evaluation to UK HE, with a feeling that teachers of UK universities, especially those involved in undergraduate teaching, are more academically competent than their counterparts in China. However, that gap was perceived to be narrower between postgraduate teachers in these two countries.

It is uncertain to what degree this student interviewee's expectation is representative of other Chinese students. It is also doubtful whether this interviewee had undergraduate learning experiences both in the United Kingdom and in China. This research argues that, if mutual, early and focused communications between Student-participant 5 and her teachers at the researched university had occurred, she would have managed such expectation, and her teachers or the university could have gained more information about how such expectation was formed:

In China, although some universities are good, I still feel many teachers of undergraduates in those universities are not very academically competent. Teachers of postgraduates may be better. But in the United Kingdom, I feel even teachers of undergraduates are very professional and competent. (Student-participant 5)

More frequently, a few student interviewees related professionalism of academics to the quality of their teaching. Bothwell (2016) found that Chinese students nowadays pay greater attention to data about student satisfaction and teaching quality when selecting a host university. The importance of teaching quality, nevertheless, raises further questions: 1) were the students interviewees holding similar understandings of teaching quality?; and 2) were these student interviewees and their teachers holding similar understandings of teaching quality? Although the two sides were studying/teaching at the same university when this research was carried out, it does not necessarily mean that they openly discussed with each other their own expectations of quality teaching and shared common criteria against which teaching could be consistently evaluated.

One student expressed that the quality of general teaching process should be above everything else in importance for providing a good HE service. For her, the scope of teaching quality was broad, including a wide range of things regarding the courses:

Teachers and the quality of their teaching... Including the course content, the course arrangement, and the design of assignments and exams. I think they are the, in the first place, important. (Student-participant 4)

In the case of being taught by academics who were not native English speakers, two student interviewees specifically related teaching quality to teachers' accent. Under some circumstances, the issue of accent even obscured the teaching content and therefore impeded their understanding and learning.

Their accent. My English listening is not very competent, but their accent makes the situation worse... some teachers have strong accent, such as Indian accent. Their accent is a problem. (Student-participant 1)

The teacher's accent. For example, we cannot understand some teachers with Indian accent. (Student-participant 2)

Making contributions to professionalism, Student-participant 3 regarded the attitude of teachers toward questions asked by students as an affective factor of student learning. Parasuraman et al. (1998) maintain that the empathy offered to customers is vital to service quality. In the context of

HE, empathy can be caring, support or patience displayed by an academic for his students (Hellsten, 2002).

For a teacher, the question (students asked) may be easy. But students need more explanations. Therefore, patience is very important. They need to answer students' questions clearly, thoroughly and patiently. It will also affect students' attitude. Teachers' attitude is important. If their attitude is good, students will feel more motivated to learn deeper and more. (Student participant 3)

Fellow-student quality

To ensure the service quality of HE of UK universities, student interviewees believed that not only the quality of academics was significant, but also the quality of fellow students. It seems that student interviewees emphasised more the external influences (e.g., from their teachers and fellow students) on service quality of HE, rather than on their own input to their HE experience.

I still think improving the student quality is important. It will be better if teacher quality could be improved as well. (Student-participant 1)

The quality of fellow students was first about the standards adopted by a UK university in recruiting international students. As one student interviewee maintained, potential international students should be required to have competency in English and prior knowledge about the subject to learn in advance of an official admission. Otherwise, learning in UK HE would be difficult:

There are some criteria to be met by applicants. These criteria exist for some reasons… Applicants have to reach this standard to be admitted. For example, they need to have enough knowledge about the subject and an ability to understand what is taught, in order to be accepted by unis. If they fail to meet the standard, their learning will be hard. (Student-participant 3)

Certainly, the quality of fellow students should not be overlooked after they have been accepted by the university. In order to ensure the quality of HE, two student interviewees believed that assessment at due time and strict assessment criteria could be effective ways to motivate and evaluate student learning in UK HE.

The two interviewees' assessment expectations reinforced the researcher's question about whether other Chinese students would agree that more frequent or more difficult assessment contributes to the quality of their learning experience at the current university and to their academic success in UK HE. Noticeably, the two interviewees did not indicate that they had communicated with academic staff regarding their expectations as such. This implies that the following comments on assessment were probably based on the two students' individual feelings, rather than on common understandings that are shared by the teachers and their fellow Chinese students:

I think the exams are quite necessary. Students need an efficient way to be assessed... Even the mid-term exams and assignments are necessary. Although I don't like exams, I feel they are helpful for my study and make me keep motivated. (Student-participant 3)

Some of my friends, even though they are studying at Master's level, still think the assessments are not with high standard. There should be a high requirement for students… I mean academically. (Student-participant 4)

Learning atmosphere

Nurturing an inspiring learning atmosphere was also expected by some student interviewees. In general, a good learning atmosphere was regarded as part of a facilitating soft environment for student learning. This theme appears to support an earlier argument that, when discussing how to achieve an expected level of service quality, the students interviewed were apt to focus on external influences, as in this case, where Student-participant 4 expected their English learning to be supported by an external environment with an encouraging learning atmosphere. Chinese international students studying in UK HE considered that it would be stimulating to be immersed in an effective language-learning environment and be beneficial to their English competency (e.g., Bordia et al., 2006, 2011):

Soft (environment) is the learning atmosphere of the university. It includes the school motto, its history, its expectations of students, its plan for the future development and so on. (Student-participant 4)

Another important (for a high service quality) might be environment. I mean, language environment. As English has become the mainstream language of the world, I think a good language-learning environment is helpful for improving English competence. Especially leaning English in an English-speaking country. (Student-participant 4)

By contrast, a disappointing language-learning atmosphere was reported by Student-participant 1 to exert negative influences on students' motivation to attend lectures; hence, learning could be hindered. For example, it was considered unhelpful for English proficiency if fellow classmates do not use English as their medium for communication in an academic setting. Her following comments are that her learning in the United Kingdom and evaluation of the HE offering of her university are greatly influenced by which language is used by her Chinese fellows*:*

Actually, I even do not want to attend every lecture. In a lecture, most of the classmates are Chinese. In last semester when we had many Chinese students using Chinese directly to ask questions. All the discussions during the lecture time were all in Chinese as well. I feel that I am learning in China, not in the United Kingdom. (Student-participant 1)

Tangibles

In addition to fostering a desirable soft environment, three student interviewees discussed the significance of the physical environment of a UK university. All of them placed exclusive and explicit emphasis on the function of tangibles as serving academic purposes, rather than leisure. It was expected that UK universities would provide facilities based on good knowledge of the various expectations of students learning different subjects:

Another point is about the campus environment, including soft and hard environment. Hard environment is about facilitates and equipment provided by the university. (Student-participant 4)

The environment of a university is also important. I mean facilities. For example, for students like us, who do a lot of calculations, facilities for reading are enough. But for those who study engineering, they need to a lot of labs. So whether a university can provide these facilities is important. (Student-participant 2)

Regarding this theme, the library and lecture rooms were paid the most attention. In terms of the library, being open for 24 hours, having enough spaces for self-study and being equipped with essential facilities were important to the three student interviewees' quality learning experiences

I think the classroom where we have lectures and the library are very important for a student's daily learning. These two are the most important for our daily learning experience. In terms of library, if it could be open for 24 hours, have enough studying areas, and printing machines. (Student-participant 1)

Student-participant 1 further explained that she expected a university to give full consideration to the number of attendees when arranging lecture rooms. Her comment inferred that if the lecture room is uncomfortably crowded, students are likely to reduce their motivation to attend the lecture:

The *room size needs to depend on the number of students… But the size should be reasonable. Sometimes if you feel unhappy about it, you can just escape that lecture. If the room is too crowded, my motivation is affected*. (Student-participant 1)

Notably, in spacious rooms, the facilities should consider the rooms' size. Otherwise, the quality of student learning and teaching might be negatively affected:

I think teaching facilities are also very important. For example, I can't hear clearly the teacher when having classes. In a very big classroom, the teacher only wore a very small microphone. The quality of this aspect is not very good. In addition, the projector used in the class. In a big classroom, I can't clearly read what the teacher writes on the blackboard. (Student-participant 2)

Career support

Some student interviewees were concerned about their career prospects after graduation. For a quality HE experience in the United Kingdom, they suggested that it was essential for a university to support students in their future career. Being unfamiliar with industries in the United Kingdom, Student-participants 1 and 4 expected more contact with and knowledge about the industry. They believed the host university was mainly responsible for the provision of such support and for helping with its students' future career development:

Another factor is the career prospect of graduates, which can be used to evaluate the service quality of HE of a university. I feel that nowadays universities need to pay a lot of attention to their graduates' career and further development. (Student-participant 1)

Another point is that besides the knowledge about the finance in China, we need to have more contacts with the finance in UK. For example, we need to know what qualifications we have to get to enter the finance area in the UK. (Student-participant 4)

The student expectations outlined above reflect an important recommendation made by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2015) to UK HE providers: it will be found helpful to consider and support international students' increase emphasis on employability during and after their study in the United Kingdom. Temple et al. (2014), in their report to the HE Academy (HEA), noted that all the case study universities (6 HE institutions containing two with relatively high proportion of research income, 2 with relatively high proportion of teacher income and the other 2 in the middle) were clear about students' increasing employability concerns, which were addressed through 'curriculum change, emphasising current employer demands, as well as through advice services and placements' (p.21).

4.2.2.2 The perspectives of academic staff

In term of what affects service quality of UK HE, two themes emerged from the data collected from academic staff interviewees: teacher quality and expectation communication between the teacher and student. Both themes are integral parts of the teaching and learning process. Therefore, they back up one key quantitative finding that academic staff scored the academic factor as the most vital aspect for desirable service quality of UK HE.

Teacher quality

Similar to student-participants, the majority of academic interviewees linked HE quality foremost to the quality of the teacher. This common theme provided some rich insights into why both groups of participants of the quantitative strand attached the highest level of importance to the academic factor. It is also interesting to note that only some of academic interviewees' interpretations of this common theme were shared by student interviewees. This, again, infers that teachers and students can have different understandings even though they appear to discuss the same topic. Therefore, it could be argued that teacher quality, although emerging from both perspectives, highlights the importance of enhancing mutual communication between academics and students.

What makes a good experience? I think it largely comes down to the people who deliver that experience to you. (Staff-participant 2)

First of all, I think is the teaching quality. Evidently, I mean the quality of the teachers. (Staff-participant 1)

I think teachers are important in the first place. (Staff-participant 6)

More specifically, it was expected that teachers at UK universities possess adequate and even cutting-edge knowledge of the subject that they are teaching.

They need to have right knowledge, which is, again, should be relatively easy to ensure. (Staff-participant 6)

I think the first important thing for a good quality learning experience is being taught by people who understand the subject, have experiences both as academics and also practitioners as well… so they keep on top of the up-to-date things and knowledge to pass on. (Staff-participant 2)

In the view of two teacher-participants, a good teacher should also be good at teaching. It was concerned that teachers good at conducting research are not necessarily so good in their teaching practice. In some cases, being a good teacher was thought to be even divergent with being an outstanding researcher. However, for offering quality learning experiences to Chinese international students, the teaching capacity of a teacher was perceived to be more important than research competency:

I think it is all very well having the knowledge, but what students want is someone who can help them facilitate the learning. I don't think you have to be a top academic in terms of publications, papers and research. I think what students want is to be taught by people who actually are very good teachers. (Staff-participant 2)

At Russell Group universities, research is very important and I think it is difficult to be good at research and teaching… there is conflicting demands: you are expected to publish. and the skills you have for research aren't the same skills you need for teaching. Research you need to shut yourself away and concentrate, whereas teaching you have to be more open. (Staff-participant 6)

One staff-participant highlighted the importance of teachers' motivation for ensuring good teaching. He maintained that prevailing promotion criteria in UK HE induce academics to switch most of their attentions from improving teaching to doing research and piling up publications. It is especially salient for teachers of Russell Group universities, in which conducting research has a decisive role in teachers' promotion:

Teachers' promotion is very important for HE quality. Most of HE institutions pay more attentions to the publications of the teacher, not the quality of their teaching. Research-centred universities don't *pay equal emphasis to teachers' teaching ability. For promotion, most academics are evaluated based on their research capability… in this case, how teaching can be motivated?* (Staff-participant 1)

The importance of teachers’ ability to communicate efficiently with international students whose mother tongue is not English was highlighted. Student interviewees raised a similar issue regarding some international teachers’ accent, which might set back teacher–student communications and student learning. This was also observed by some teacher interviewees.

I think communication ability is extremely important when you are teaching students whose first language is not English. (Staff-participant 2)

I think you (teachers) need to be able to communicate. We have a lot of international staff and I think sometimes that can create a problem. On my feedback that I get for my module, I often get a comment that they like my lectures because I am English – they can understand me. (Staff-participant 6)

Expectation communication between the teacher and student

In spite of the shared concerns about teacher quality, it is evident that student and teacher interviewees did not have similar expectations regarding this aspect. Unlike the students’ focus on external influences, teacher interviewees paid more attention to communication of HE expectations, for which they, together with Chinese students, should both have significant input. To ensure the service quality in HE, a high priority is that academics manage, as early as possible, international students’ expectations of what teaching and learning are like in the United Kingdom.

According to two academic participants, international students were expected to gain necessary and accurate understandings about UK HE in advance of their learning. For instance, they maintained that it would be beneficial for Chinese students to be aware of what is expected from a student in UK HE, and what to expect of their upcoming learning (e.g., core course information, the syllabus to be covered and how courses are delivered). Chinese students were also expected to be conscious that learning in the United Kingdom is considerably different from that in China.

What I also found is that lots of students come in here... but a lot of academics don’t manage students' expectations from Day 1. You (academics) need to manage their expectations in terms of we are facilitating you in your learning to become independent learners. We are not telling you what to write. This is what you might be used to as an undergraduate in China or South-East Asia. This is not what is happening here. So that's why, in the school where you teach business to international students, I think their expectations should be managed a lot earlier. (Staff-participant 3)

But it’s all the things about understanding how it is delivered, what you mean to do and what the lecturer does. So I think Chinese students generally have the expectation that they are going to be *taught everything. So they remember what they are told and go and repeat it. It doesn't work like that in the UK*. (Staff-participant 6)

Some academic interviewees realised that expectation communications between academics and international students was an effective means of facilitating above-mentioned students' understandings of UK HE and of their teachers' expectations:

The students' expectations perhaps, or the potential students—the applicants, are difficult to manage. That is not something that is entirely within the gift of academics… the key is to communicate. (Staff-participant 4)

Are they doing some strong and clear communications? It is very important… I imagine it is very disorientating arriving into a new institution anyway. But to travel around the world, so to know where you expect to be, who is supposed to meet. That information is communicated clearly. Understanding is made. (Staff-participant 5)

Equally important, academic interviewees deemed that expectation communications could also provide opportunities for them to find out more about students. Thus, they would be in a better position to form realistic expectations concerning the Chinese students whom they are teaching. One academic pointed out that teachers should not make assumptions about international students' expectations prior to an actual occurrence of expectation communications with them. He further proposed that making teaching materials as accessible as possible is a way to convey teachers' academic expectations of their students:

But in general, you know, we don't make assumptions about Chinese students' past experience, their attitudes. We present as accessible as possible. I am thinking about things like we make sure the materials are exact accessible. (Staff-participant 3)

Nevertheless, just making the teaching materials accessible is far from being sufficient for a provision of HE of the desirable service quality. Another interviewee maintained that it is more important to be reliable (Parasuraman et al., 1998; Shekarchizadeh et al., 2011) – implementing exactly what has been communicated to students:

Getting that information out isn't a problem. Then for quality, you actually need to deliver what you said you gonna deliver. (Staff-participant 6)

It is particularly notable that the expectation communications with students, as advocated by most teacher interviewees, ought to be dyadic in nature. Through dyadic communications as such, not only academics could gain more knowledge about international students' expectations, but also international students are able to understand better what they are expected to do by the UK academics. Both sides would therefore manage their own and each other's expectations. Two academics believed that a good teacher–student relationship is built on such mutual understandings of each other's HE expectations and shared commitment to work on better learning and teaching experiences:

I think the key thing to make a good service is making sure that you know where the starting point is for the student, and the student or the potential student know where the starting point is for teacher. and you sort of meet the same point, and I think that's the base of a good teaching relationship. and that's probably one of the essential elements. (Staff-participant 4)

I think quality is two-way. So the student has responsibility as well as academics. and I think there needs to be a clear understanding of what is expected on each side. (Staff-participant 6)

4.2.3 Research Question 5

5. From the perspectives of its international students and academic staff, how can the quality of HE service be improved at the university?

4.2.3.1 Perspectives of Chinese international students

In general, the student interviewees suggested that the overall service quality of the HE offered by their current university was not as high as they had expected. For instance, Student-participant 1 asserted, 'The quality of the Master programme is not that high. You can know this by looking at our university'.

The detailed remarks on Research Question 5 made by student interviewees embody one major quantitative finding: they felt that the academic factor at their current university failed to achieve the expected level of service quality, because when requested to provide suggestions to their university for service quality enhancement, the student interviewees focused intensively and overtly on aspects closely related to their academic life. They gave prominence to improving teaching quality and establishing more rigorous requirements for the recruitment of international students for the sake of better teaching and learning experiences. When commenting on the tangible characteristics of their university, the student interviewees made positive evaluations and exclusively valued the supporting role of existing facilities in their academic life.

Teaching quality

To improve HE quality, the universities were advised to enhance the quality of teaching further – the paramount contributor to teacher quality, according to most student interviewees' perceptions of Research Question 5. In the following quotations, the students tended to credit better teaching to a higher quality of academic staff:

Teachers' ability to make us understand the knowledge is various. To improve teacher quality of our university, our teachers, in the first place, need to be good at teaching. (Student-participant 3)

The quality of our teachers is not that high. You can know this by looking at teaching quality in our university. (Student-participant 1)

In terms of how to improve teaching at the current university, the student first referred to teaching content. Two student interviewees expected the teaching content to be more specific and with less overlap between different modules:

I think the course content needs to be improved. More specific, rather than the broad, knowledge should be included. (Student-participant 2)

There are lots of overlaps between course contents of different modules. (Student-participant 1)

More emphasis was placed on improving the teaching approach. A few student-participants were not very satisfied about the phenomenon that some of their teachers delivered the lecture mainly by going through prepared slides. They thought that the teaching, as such, was similar to the traditional teaching methods in China, which was divergent with their expectations of studying in the United Kingdom:

His teaching approach is very like Chinese. He just read the PPT slides in his lecture. His lecture appears to have a British form, but the essence is Chinese. (Student-participant 4)

(Do) Not just read PPT that are prepared in advance. A lot of my teachers did so. (Student-participant 3)

It is doubtful whether the academics were aware that their Chinese students actually expected to be taught in a more interactive and engaging way. Given the dynamics in people's perceptions, more frequent and transparent expectation communications have great potential to provide Chinese students and academics with opportunities to discuss openly each other's expectations of how teaching should be delivered and why those expectations were formed. Academics may make sure of these good opportunities to inform students of the rationale behind the adopted teaching approach and to learn, from their Chinese students' perspective, how their teaching could be more effective. Likewise, Chinese students may come to know more clearly what input they are expected to bring to the class to support the interactivity of the learning and teaching process.

The following comments underline student interviewees' preference for a heuristic teaching approach. Student-participants 1 and 3 wanted the teachers to demonstrate problem-solving procedures in a more enlightening way and to provide more detailed explanations about the key steps in the procedures. In the current literature, there is a tendency to highlight the importance of managing student expectations of HE. Plenty of previous studies have demonstrated students' inaccurate expectations of teaching in HE (e.g., Lowe and Cook, 2004; Sander et al., 2000) and the consequent negative effects on their learning and general HE experience. This tendency leaves much room to question whether teachers' expectation of their students also need to be managed in some ways, given the increasing diversity in the student population. It could be argued that student interviewees' expectations of teaching methods exhibited in this section are reasonable, or at least not unrealistic. Nevertheless, there was still perceived to be a discrepancy between it and students' actual learning experience at the university. This should make us more aware that expectation communications, as well as expectation management, have to be mutual, with active input from and desirable outcomes for both students and teachers.

This year, a new teacher uses Excel that is full of correct answers. He just orally explains where the answers are from. He just provides us with the correct answers from the beginning. (Student-participant 1)

To answer questions, they did not provide enough explanations about why they solved the question like this. I think if a teacher cannot answer students' questions thoroughly, the teaching quality will be affected. (Student-participant 3)

Recruitment

Four student interviewees mentioned the possibility that the service quality of HE provided by their university would be more satisfactory if there were some changes in international student recruitment. For some of them, reducing the number of newly enrolled students would be beneficial to teaching quality:

To improve teaching quality, the university should not expand enrolment or recruit a large number of students. (Student-participant 4)

Some maintained that setting higher thresholds for admission would be helpful. If the quality of admitted international students were to be improved, it is believed to benefit teaching quality:

The *standard for recruitment should be increased. For example, the required language competence or the IELTS score could be higher. Once the quality of enrolled students is improved in our university, the final teaching outcome will be also improved*. (Student-participant 5)

There should be a higher requirement for applicants because they are coming for a degree. (Student participant 2)

Two interviewees from the Business School paid particular attention to the diversity of the student population. They regarded that their learning experiences at current university would have been more positive if the nationalities of fellow students were more mixed. This finding indicates again that fellow students exert a significant effect on student interviewees' learning experiences. Being surrounded by students from the same country may diminish Chinese students' urge to improve their English competence or to acquire new knowledge about how to get along well with people from different cultures:

Our programme already has a large number of Chinese students. So I always feel that I have lectures in China... I think the university can control the size of Chinese students. (Student-participant 1)

If the university cares about HE quality, just level out the recruitment. Having some from here and some from there. I think I can have nicer learning experiences if the universities does so. (Student-participant 5)

Tangibles

With regard to the physical characteristics of the current university, such as the library, more than half of the student interviewees felt satisfied, to the level that they had expected. They recognised that the university has been working on this aspect. For example:

For library, I believe our university does well. They provide a lot of books and enough basic facilities. (Student-participant 3)

Actually, our university is making efforts in this aspect. For example, the library of our university is good. (Student-participant 4)

Above comments are in line with the results of Student Experience Survey 2017 (THE, 2017), in which students felt more satisfied with libraries and their opening hours (an overall score of 6.1 out of a maximum 7) compared to the other seven aspects (e.g., well-structured courses, industry connections and good personal relationship with teaching staff) in the survey.

Compared to the library, which is closely related to academic life, supporting facilities such as student shops, cafes and restaurants, specifically designed to provide convenience in students' daily life, were deemed less significant in the eyes of one student interviewee. Nevertheless, he thought that the university had achieved a favourable performance by offering them:

Other aspects are not that important, such as shops, restaurants, but our university does well in providing them. (Student-participant 1)

4.2.3.2 Perspectives of academic staff

The quantitative data suggest that teacher respondents, like student respondents, awarded the academic factor a level of service quality lower than their expectations. Regarding what could be improved in the future, the suggestions given by the academic interviewees to the university are consistent with above quantitative findings in that they focused either on academics' teaching practice or on the learning experiences of international students. Furthermore, academic interviewees' perceptions of Research Question 5 enriched the above quantitative findings by revealing detailed information about how the university could do better in terms of the academic factor, and what was expected to improve to offer a better quality of HE in the future.

Motivation for teaching

It was found from the attribute analysis (section 4.1.3.2) that the academic staff participants scored the attribute '*My university has skilled and engaging teachers to teach courses'* a relatively low level of service quality. The suggestions presented in this section pinpoint what teacher interviewees thought was lacking in this aspect, and provide deeper insights into how they expected the university to improve in future.

As revealed by the teacher interviewees, teachers' motivation to modify their teaching practice was not high enough to meet their expectations. Therefore, if the university is committed to improve its service quality, teachers' motivation for teaching should primarily be enhanced. Academic interviewees proposed several ways to achieve this. First, nurturing a fair working environment was put forward by one academic participant:

They need to want to teach and I don't think that is the case with all lecturers… the first thing is fairness. Creating a fair working environment for teachers is important. I don't think the working environment in my faculty is fair enough. (Staff-participant 1)

The second suggestion concerned the leadership of a faculty. An interviewee believed that the leadership in his faulty was responsible for the high employee turnover that was negatively influencing teachers' motivation to improve their teaching quality. He suggested that the leader should have a clearer vision of the direction of the faculty's future development:

Because the leader has to have a clear idea about how the faculty will develop in the future. Employee turnover is high in my faculty. Some teachers work here for a short time and leave. It is worth attention. The fundamental reason, I think, is the leadership. (Staff-participant 4)

Implied in the following comments made by staff-participant 6, the prevailing promotion criterion, with a strong emphasis on research achievement, was actually discouraging teachers from focusing on enhancing teaching quality for the benefit of the students. To increase teachers' motivation for teaching to benefit service quality of educational offerings, another recommended way is to change the promotion policy currently implemented at the university. As Temple et al. (2014) maintain, teaching does not depend merely on the decisions made by individual teachers or by the module teams; it is also greatly influenced by a series of institutional policies

I think they need to change the promotion system because at the moment, to get promotion, really you need to be good at research even you are on a teaching. contract. If you are not doing any research, they are still expecting you to have an external profile. If you do a lot of things to build your profile externally, you are not doing things for students. (Staff-participant 6)

Expectation communication between the teacher and student

According to most teacher interviewees, the quality of teaching and learning experience at the investigated university would be better if it made more efforts to boost teacher–student communications, by which each side could understand more about the other's HE expectations and experiences.

Teacher interviewees indicated that communication between the teacher and international student of expectations is of remarkable importance for quality HE (discussed earlier in section 4.2.2.2). Accordingly, they expected their university to be more aware of existing communication deficiencies and to take strategic steps to facilitate such communications.

For one particular staff-participant, there are already expectation communications deficiencies prior to the start of courses. Before commencing a course, many international students fail to form realistic expectations of UK HE and lack an accurate understanding of the course that they have enrolled on. Under such circumstances, potential problems are bound to arise:

I don't think a lot of students know what they signed up for. So I think there is deficiency there in the improvement in terms of getting real understanding. Somewhere the communication falls down. I get an impression as a teacher that some Chinese students come here without knowing what they have signed up for. That's a big quality issue because if they start from that basis, you know, their expectations don't match and you will have potential problems. It is not every case, but I think there are a lot of cases. (Staff-participant 2)

Likewise, two academics perceived that it was neither easy for teachers to obtain a good understanding of the students accepted during the recruitment process or even before the actual start of the courses:

We don't know the students well enough, in terms of what they like, what they know. We get a list quite later on, of their name and what they have studied. So that is very crude and basic at that level. (Staff-participant 5)

The recruitment is a strange process. We don't get any real, meaningful interaction with recruitment. So most of time, at the right time of the year, we get a list saying: this is the student who has been accepted on the course…We get a list of them, and in September, they appear. (Staff-participant 2)

In order to promote the communication of expectations, several suggestions were offered by academic participants. They expected teachers, at an early stage, to create more opportunities for open dialogue whereby international students and the teachers themselves would learn what is expected from each other. Communication as such was believed by most academic interviewees to be helpful in the establishment of a deeper teacher–student relationship:

We are talking about experiences, you know. Experiences will be much better if there is a better understanding from the students what to expect when they get here, and the people that are teaching… they need to know more about what the students been told before they get here. I don't think that's fully understood by myself and some of my colleagues. (Staff-participant 2)

Manage expectations and facilitate and help and guide those international students through especially the first few weeks… It is a mutual, reciprocal relationship. I think it is vital. (Staff-participant 3)

One is just to develop more personal relationship with tutees because we found that really helps. Ten minutes near the start of the year goes long way… You gonna have a deep understanding or a thicker concept of who they are and what they want. (Staff-participant 4)

One staff-participant suggested that with open and mutual dialogues, academics could know more about their students and would be in a better position to manage their own expectations of Chinese international students and to optimise students' potential:

You can't change their culture. But what you can do is you can adapt yourself so that, together, we can get the best potential out of the students and they will work for you. (Staff-participant 4)

Apart from the teachers, the current university was expected to contribute to the promotion of expectation communications as well. Most teacher interviewees wished for more training opportunities from the university, for learning more about Chinese culture and Chinese HE systems, and for developing more informed strategies to work effectively with Chinese students:

It will be useful for academic staff to have more discussion, and maybe even training around working with Chinese students in general. I would appreciate some kind of simple things. For example, pronouncing names. We get a list of student names. and maybe some kind of background on what education is like in China… We only have assumptions about that. (Staff- participant 4)

I think if university is going to be serious, you know, about providing a high-quality education for a large number of international Chinese students, I think it needs to acknowledge that and provides more support for academic staff.

I don't know a lot about this of course, but the way that (Chinese) students used to be taught in China is very much… Lots of lectures, people write notes and no interactions. For most lecturers and teachers who used to teaching a broad mix of students or British students, whatever, that is very difficult to deal with… We don't know enough about, you know, the way that Chinese students learn and we were not taught to deal with that in a meaningful way. (Staff-participant 2)

Recruitment

from the perspectives of almost all academics interviewed, adopting a stiffer standard for international student recruitment had great potential to enhance the service quality of the HE offerings by the investigated university. This suggestion is similar to student interviewees' perceptions of Research Question 5. In other words, both groups wished the university to be more selective about accepting international students in future.

Based on her teaching experience at Master's degree level, one academic indicated that the current recruiting criteria for international postgraduate applicants were not demanding enough:

We basically so well accepted... Every year, we get many students who we are absolutely shocked that they got through the system, because we encounter them. (Staff-participant 2)

Based on the recommendations made by academic interviewees, a stricter recruitment standard would include a higher language requirement that potential international applicants should meet. One staff-participant suggested that an IELTS score of at least 7.0 should be required by the university to ensure that international students are competent in English. In this case, their academic life in a new culture will be eased:

I am still not saying they can write well enough because I think that is the language thing that the university doesn't expect more. Other universities have 7 (IELTS score) and 7.5. We don't at business level. I think it should be 7. But it is only 6.5. ...in some ways, making them have a higher language criteria. (Staff-participant 3)

This interviewee further claimed that that a lack of English competency in some admitted international postgraduate students was actually counterproductive for their postgraduate learning at current university, as well as for their communications with teachers. Such a point of view was also supported by Staff-participant 2.

I think especially the MSc level that we are getting are not of the quality. It's not their fault. But they are not of the quality to actually meet the level of certain criteria in terms of reading, writing, and producing the work at the MSc level that we require. Because even at 6.5 IELTS, they cannot even understand what I am saying to them. They cannot understand the questions, so how will I expect them to answer the questions. (Staff-participant 3)

They don't understand very simple things we tell them, you know. I try, when I am talking to people, as clear as I can. (Staff-participant 2)

However, both of the teacher interviewees asserted that the university should be responsible for the inadequate English of some international students and the negative consequences. For instance:

But it is not their (international students') fault. It is the university's, because the university wants money. They are not interested any more in quality. (Staff-participant 3)

We have to teach students who do not have that core skill – the ability to understand what we are teaching – because the university allows them to go through the system without sufficient English... That is the university's fault, I think. (Staff-participant 2)

Other academic interviewees associated a stricter recruitment standard with a smaller number of accepted students. In many postgraduate taught programmes, service quality was perceived to fall short of their expected level due to an explosive growth in numbers. For example:

I think the university has over-recruited. I think we take on too many students, so the Master's experience is not as good as it could be. The number of students we expect to teach is very high, is gone up. So the experience, for wherever you come from, is not so good. (Staff-participant 6)

To promote the quality of HE offerings, the university was advised to reduce the number of international student recruited by rejecting those unable to reach the language entrance criteria:

I think if the university took off maybe, I don't know, 20 per cent of students who really struggle, who can't get IELTES at 5.5, and then that would help everyone a lot. (Staff-participant 2)

Similar to insufficient English competency, the large number of admitted students also brought enormous challenges to effective and regular teacher–student expectation communications and to the building up of a deep teacher–student relationship:

When I did my Masters many years ago, it was 12 (students). It meant you probably got to know your pathway – your programme leader and your course leader – quite well. So in terms of experience, perhaps it is the best experience when you are working with a leader and maybe 12 students. But now I got more than 60 students. (Staff-participant 4)

Comparing interviewees' perceptions of Research Question 5, student and academic interviewees apparently had a common wish: for the university to reduce the number of admitted international students in future to ensure the service quality of its HE offering. However, it is uncertain whether academics and Chinese students had easy access to an effective channel of communication with the university so that they could let the it realise this common concern. It seems that some of the student–teacher HE expectation communications also require the input of other HE stakeholders. For instance, to make student and academic interviewees' this common wish meaningful, an awareness of and commitment from the university are vital.

4.2.4 Research Question 8

8. From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how is intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom affected?

4.2.4.1 Perspectives of Chinese international students

Research Question 8 probed important factors in the intercultural adjustment of Chinese international students to the United Kingdom. Three themes emerged from the views of student interviewees: language competency; cultural distance; and cultural knowledge. It is noticeable that student interviewees unanimously referred to intercultural contact when they elaborated each of these themes.

It seems that student interviewees tended to see intercultural adjustment from their own perspective. When discussing the influencing factors, they focused almost exclusively on what they needed to do to achieve intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom. The support of academics and the importance of communicating with them seemed to be overlooked. It should be noted that student interviewees develop an awareness of actively seeking support from their teachers. In order to receive support that genuinely addresses their academic needs and support their intercultural adjustment, student interviewees need to be more aware that it is important to talk to their teachers about main challenges that they encounter and the help that they expect.

Language competency

All student interviewees emphasised the paramount role of language competence – English competence, in the case of this research – in intercultural adjustment of Chinese international students to the United Kingdom. For instance:

The most critical point is language. It is very important. (Student-participant 4)

The most important factor for our intercultural adjustment is language, of course. (Student-participant 1)

According to these views, English proficiency is essential for intercultural contact. A lack of English competency presumably makes it difficult for Chinese international students to seek interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds. Student interviewees believed that more intercultural contact was helpful in enhancing their English competency, which, in turn, would be beneficial to their intercultural adjustment:

Some Chinese students are not very good at using English, so they stay here and may do not want to interact with people from other countries. Instead, they like interacting with Chinese. This is not helpful for them to adjust to the UK... (Student-participant 4)

If possible, more contact with local friends and using English is essential. Not only with local people, more contact with people from other countries is also important. In this way, English competency will be improved quickly. (Student-participant 3)

If having more contact with foreigners, we can improve our oral English and the accuracy of using certain vocabularies. (Student-participant 5)

To be more accurate, it was Chinese students' self-perceived, rather than their actual, language competency that appeared to be influential for their intercultural contact. Two student interviewees, who were lacking self-confidence in their language competency, reported that they were less likely to be engaged in interactions with people from different countries:

I think my English is not very good. Sometimes I cannot understand others speaking English. So I have fewer interactions with foreigners. (Student-participant 1)

I am not very competent in English even till now. So I am afraid of using English to communicate with people from other countries. (Student-participant 2)

Cultural distance

Student interviewees also said that it was extremely hard to eliminate the distance between Chinese and British cultures, in which case their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom was impeded:

I think intercultural adaptation is quite hard because most of the time, you could not understand the 'critical point' in British culture… It is hard to remove this difference. (Student-participant 1)

Cultural difference sometimes is a headache for my adjustment here. (Student-participant 4)

Similar to the language barrier, dissimilarities between different cultures can also obstruct intercultural contact. The most frequently mentioned consequence of insurmountable cultural distance was the feeling of not being able to engage with intercultural interaction. Some interviewees were even ill at ease with people who were not from China. Therefore, they tended deliberately to reduce intercultural contact and turn to communications with fellow Chinese:

I feel that foreigners and we don't have a lot of things in common. For example, the food we like and the famous stars we like are different. It will be very difficult to have a good chat with them about these aspects. (Student-participant 1)

Communications among people from the same country are easier. Sometimes we are stopped by the difference between different cultures. Things making foreigners laugh are not funny for us. (Student-participant 3)

How British socialise, British people's humour, what they talk when having meals and their favourite food are all different from Chinese styles. All these belong to culture. (Student-participant 4)

Cultural knowledge

To achieve a better level of intercultural adjustment, the interviewees recommended that acquiring more British culture-related knowledge was helpful. It could be learned from various sources, such as the media or by participation in activities in which people from various cultures are involved:

My social contact is full of Chinese because I am not very familiar more British culture, except some important festivals. I think more understanding of British culture is helpful. (Student-participant 2)

A Chinese student needs to learn more British history from the internet. You can learn it from different websites – any of them – as long as you can understand it. Or you can read more British *newspapers and watch more BBC, to know what is happening and what is the popular topic of the day.* (Student-participant 4)

It is important to attend the activities that are popular among foreigners, and to know more about what they like. (Student-participant 5)

4.2.4.2 Perspectives of academic staff

From the perspectives of the academic staff interviewees, intercultural adjustment of Chinese students studying in UK HE is greatly affected by three factors: intercultural contact; cultural knowledge; and length of stay. While the length of stay in the United Kingdom was not mentioned by the student interviewees, the importance of the other two themes to intercultural adjustment was recognised by both groups of interviewees.

Intercultural contact

Similar to the student interviewees, the teacher interviewees also argued that interaction with people from other countries was of particular importance. More intercultural contact was believed to bring benefit to the level of intercultural adjustment achieved by Chinese international students in the United Kingdom:

I think one important thing is not to only have friends with other Chinese students, and I can understand it. But if you want to adjust, you have to mix. You need to make friends with people from other countries. (Staff-participant 6)

Nevertheless, all academic interviewees noticed that the Chinese international students were apt to interact with their compatriots. They thought that this inclination exerted a negative influence on Chinese students' adjustment to the United Kingdom. For example, a few academics maintained that:

They like that, glue together. (Staff-participant 3)

Lots of the students are there and they only interact with Chinese students. It is only relatively few that getting any real cultural experiences, because they just stick among their friends. (Staff-participant 2)

So the main problem is if they only want to talk to Chinese, and they only want to think about China, it is very easy for them to do that and very difficult for them to gain intercultural experiences for intercultural adjustment. (Staff-participant 4)

For the sake of improving the level of intercultural adjustment accomplished by Chinese students, a staff-participant therefore suggested that:

Stop speaking Chinese to your own Chinese friends. Go and join a club and mix with UK or European people. (Staff-participant 3)

Two staff-participants perceived that the overwhelming proportion of Chinese international students in relation to the international student population is responsible for this inclination to keep to Chinese compatriots and for the limited opportunities for intercultural contact in an academic setting:

One of the great problems is that with the 99% roughly, maybe sometimes as low as 95%, Chinese cohort in a class, there is not many opportunities there for them to meet and, you know, in a working setting, interacting with non-Chinese students. (Staff-participant 4)

In Business School, most students are from China. It is like a class in a Chinese university. (Staff-participant 1)

For Chinese students with low self-confidence in their language competency, it is easy to minimise intercultural contact by interacting with surrounding Chinese fellows who are easily accessible due to their large numbers . For example, one academic interview stated:

Some's English is not very good, and they are not very confident. They tend to stick together, talk to their friends, (and) not go out. Some students don't feel confident enough to break out of their shell because there are so many people who can speak their language and not enough people who don't, they don't feel they have to. (Staff-participant 2)

These comments show that most academic interviewees in this study emphasised Chinese students' responsibility to make friends with people from other countries. By simply blaming Chinese students for their limited engagement in intercultural contact, these academic interviewees appeared not sufficiently to realise the importance of investigating the underlying reasons – why Chinese students would rather interact with their compatriots or why they do not feel confident enough. Although some academic interviewees considered the large number of Chinese students as the main problem for intercultural contact, it is possible that Chinese students themselves do not share the same concern. The comments above imply that the academic interviewees of this study were not well aware that it is critical to understand the main challenges that Chinese students encounter. Two-way student–teacher communication has great potential to make academics know more, from Chinese students' perspective, about what impedes their involvement in intercultural contact. Based on such communications, academic interviewees would be more able to provide informed support to facilitate Chinese students' intercultural interaction.

Cultural knowledge

Intercultural adjustment was perceived by the academic interviewees of this study to be subject to how much Chinese students understand the host culture. They believed that, for a student learning in a new culture, possessing adequate knowledge about the HE system in that culture is of paramount importance for academic adaptation. For example, Staff-participants 6 and 2 indicated that Chinese international students had to make the effort to gain a better understanding of UK HE, such as becoming an independent learner and developing critical thinking skills, if they want to be accommodated academically:

I think Chinese students have to try to understand how HE works in the UK. Chinese students are very respectful for the lecturer. But actually, we expect to be questioned and challenged. (Staff-participant 6)

I do find with my postgraduate students I almost have to treat them like children and tell me what they are allowed to do and what they are not allowed to do, and I should not be doing that because they are grown up. (Staff-participant 2)

According to one academic interviewee, many of her postgraduate students from China expected their personal tutors to initiate meetings with them. She explained that in UK HE, students are usually expected to request a meeting actively if they want to meet their teachers or tutors. She thought a lack of accurate understanding of UK HE as such led to a regrettable phenomenon whereby students did not usually actively request such meetings with their personal tutors who, as a result, knew little about them.

After that (first formal meeting with the tutor), really it is for the student to come to see the tutor when they need to. Quite often, they don't. But when something does go wrong, they got to see a stranger because they have not made that contact. (Staff-participant 6)

Intercultural adjustment should not simply be a one-way process. It is more important to nurture in academics and Chinese students a sense of mutual adjustment. International students are certainly responsible for their own academic adjustment to the United Kingdom. But it is arguable that academics also need to notice what their roles are in international students' academic adjustment and perhaps in their own adjustment to the increasing student diversity. The above comments are questionable, because at least two important things are missing: 1) academics' responsibility to help Chinese students manage their HE expectations; and 2) academics' efforts to investigate why such observed phenomena occur and how to encourage communication between Chinese students and tutors effectively. These comments seem to assume that it is solely Chinese students' fault for not actively contacting tutors.

Once again, this research wants to suggest that academics can manage Chinese students' HE expectations and promote the effectiveness of tutoring through transparently and regularly communicating with Chinese students. Such communications would allow Chinese students to become conscious of what academic tutors expected from them and what they can expect from academic tutors. Similarly, academic tutors will gain more knowledge about how academic tutoring might be more effective for Chinese students. In this case, both parties are more likely to develop a shared understanding and sense of mutual adjustment.

With the aim of facilitating academic adjustment, an academic proposed providing enormous amounts of learning guidance to international students at the beginning of their study and then gradually reducing it:

There is obviously an issue of the educational adaption…Well, what we have to do is front load a large amount of directed learning for the first few weeks. Very very much. Look, these are the things we need to get through. These are the things for your assignment and these are the skills you need to practice. And gradually taking those off and loosening it as we go throughout the year, rather than just expecting students to turn up as self-directed learners who are going to spend 19 hours a day in the library from week one. (Staff-participant 4)

Apart from gaining more knowledge about the UK HE system, becoming familiar with the general British culture was recommended to Chinese international students striving to attain intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom:

Maybe they (Chinese international students) need to get to understand the culture where they are studying. (Staff-participant 2)

You need to do things like watch British TV. You know, some Chinese students are very hard working. So they will sit in their room and study. But you are not learning a culture in that way. (Staff-participant 6)

To help international students to accumulate cultural experiences, one academic suggested that the university could try to offer more career support. Gaining some working experiences in the United Kingdom was perceived to be an effective way to connect with British culture and to increase cultural knowledge:

I am thinking actively in supporting students to get work experience would be really good. Because clearly that's a great way to immerse yourself in a culture… So I will say as much support as possible. (Staff-participant 3)

The above comments from Staff-participants 2, 6 and 3 also imply that they were not well aware that intercultural adjustment can be a mutual process. It could be argued that academics could improve their teaching practice and maximise Chinese students' academic success by becoming more familiar with Chinese academic culture and what Chinese students bring to their learning in UK HE.

Length of stay

Half of the staff interviewees also linked the intercultural adjustment of Chinese international students to the length of their stay in the United Kingdom. For those pursuing a Master's degree in particular, the one-year study in the United Kingdom was considered to be too short to become well-adapted to British culture:

Another point is that Chinese students should not expect dramatic changes, because most of them are postgraduates who stay here for only one year. (Staff-participant 1)

I do think it is a pity that our government is so restrictive on overseas students, you know, how long they can stay. It is always sad…one year is not long enough for them to adjust. (Staff-participant 3)

From the perspectives of these two staff-participants, the pre-sessional course was not long enough to act as an effective level for many Chinese students. In many cases, it was not long enough to be as successful as expected in terms of preparing them fully for the transition to a new cultural environment:

The *pre-sessional class is not long enough for many students. Particularly they have not studied in the UK before. I think that would help a lot in terms of the quality of their experience and their intercultural adjustment here*. (Staff-participant 3)

I think they need to spend…I don't think 6 weeks or 11 weeks are enough for pre-sessional, you know, it's just not enough. I think pre-sessional does not fit the purpose. (Staff-participant 2)

4.2.5 Research Question 9

9. From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how can intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom be facilitated by universities in the United Kingdom?

4.2.5.1 Perspectives of Chinese international students

When asked to make suggestions to their university for the sake of facilitating the international adjustment of Chinese students, all student interviewees consistently placed emphasis on having more opportunities for intercultural interactions in academic and social settings. Moreover, they believed that more communication with teachers would be beneficial to their adjustment in the United Kingdom. Looking forward to more intercultural contact in the academic setting and being eager for more teacher–student communications seems to offer qualitative evidence for the quantitative finding: the sociocultural adjustment of Chinese international students has a significantly positive relationship with service quality of the academic factor of HE.

Intercultural contact

All student-participants expected their university to provide more opportunities for intercultural interaction. Only one interviewee recognised that the Confucius institute at the university had made great efforts to promote intercultural contact between Chinese students and people from other cultures:

I think our university does a good job in having a Confucius Institute here. They organise activities for important Chinese festivals. The participants are not only Chinese, but also local people and other foreigners. So I think our university does well in this aspect. (Student-participant 5)

Nevertheless, other student interviewees believed that the university needed to work on this aspect more. First, they expected teachers to facilitate intercultural contact in academic settings by means of intervening in coursework-group arrangements. They thought if teachers could interfere to some extent with the organisation, the nationality of group members would be more mixed so that intercultural contact became mandatory and thus more frequent. Otherwise, Chinese students, as they described, were inclined to choose group members who were from China. For instance:

Maybe the teacher can divide the group by himself for coursework, or interfere with the group division. Don't just ask the students themselves to that. In this way, the proportion of Chinese students and students from other countries within a group will be more reasonable. (Student-participant 1)

There may be no foreigners in a group for doing course work. Let alone when we are asked to select group members by ourselves. When selecting group members, we automatically prefer people we are familiar with and they are all from China. (Student-participant 3)

I think when doing the group work, the teacher can have a requirement that... For example, because there are too many Chinese, there should be one non-Chinese in the group. In this way, we have to speak English for group discussions. (Student-participant 4)

Besides having intercultural contact in academic settings, the student-participants looked forward to more opportunities for social contact. The university was advised to organise more events where people from different countries and from different faculties would meet and socialise with each other:

If the party is organised by the university, I think all students would like to go. I really wish that the university is the organiser and provides more opportunities for us to interact with foreigners. (Student-participant 1)

Another way to facilitate Chinese students' adjustment is that university can organise more activities so that we can meet more people from other disciplines. It will be a good chance for foreigners and Chinese to interact more. (Student-participant 4)

Actually, I still think that it is important if the university can organise more activities, such as volunteering or parities. But I found that activities like these are very limited. So I feel that it is hard to integrate into the foreigners' social circle. (Student-participant 2)

More importantly, some student participants suggested that the university should improve in terms of diffusing information on organised social activities. They felt that they were not well informed of the activities that had been arranged by the university, which was partly responsible for their absence from those activities. Due to insufficient advertisement among Chinese international students, some student-participants felt that they failed to make good use of existing social activities to increase the intercultural contact perceived to be helpful in enhancing the level of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom:

Organising more communities for communication or organising more social activities is helpful. The university needs to inform students by sending students emails and motivate us to participate. Otherwise, there is no good social contact. But I even don't know the existence, time and location of these activities. (Student-participant 2)

Maybe more interactions between people from different countries… I don't know much about student union and clubs in our university. I am not sure they have provided such opportunities for students from different countries to meet and interact. (Student-participant 5)

Student-participants' recommendations for more intercultural contact opportunities deserve consideration. For example, it is doubtful whether teachers would think that stepping into coursework group formation would be an appropriate approach to promoting intercultural contact. Also, the suggestions made by Student-participants 1, 4, and 2 in this research imply that they assumed that there had been a limited number of social activities across the university. However, what should be asked is whether the university had actually organised a few social activities. If not, a more important question needs to be asked: why were the three student interviewees not well aware of those activities? These examples further raise the importance of enhancing mutual communications between Chinese students and academics to minimise the chances of making assumptions about the other side.

Teacher-student communication

In addition to interacting with fellow students from other countries, most student interviewees expected to have more communication with academics. Recommendations such as these strengthen this study's previous argument that a fundamental issue to solve is the promotion of mutual communications between Chinese students and their teachers to make sure that they have a shared understanding of what needs to be supported and how to support. One individual longed for more channels to provide the teacher with feedback:

I really wish that we could have more opportunities to give feedback to our teachers, such as how they can improve their teaching. (Student-participant 4)

Two other student interviewees suggested that the university should appoint more Chinese teachers as personal tutors. Language appeared to be a main barrier for them to involve in student–teacher communications. They proposed that if their personal tutors could speak Chinese, they might feel more comfortable to communicate with tutors or seek help when encountering problems in the United Kingdom:

I will be more willing to communicate with my tutor if he/she is also Chinese. We come from the same country, so it won't be that difficult to communicate. The function of a tutor is to help students. When I encounter some problems, I may not be able to express myself accurately in English. (Student-participant 3)

Seeking help from our tutors is a possible way to help intercultural adjustment. But if the problems are serious or emergent, I prefer to use Chinese because it will be easier for me to describe the problem. Using English to describe the problem makes me more anxious, so I usually prefer not to communicate with my tutor. (Student-participant 2)

4.2.5.2 The perspectives of academic staff

Recruitment

When asked about how the current university could support the intercultural adjustment of its Chinese international students, some staff-participants emphasised the recruitment process prior to the students' travel to the United Kingdom. In the first place, they advised the university to curb the numbers of Chinese international students that it accepted and to balance the diversity of international admission. For example, one interviewee stated that:

Stop taking first come first serve and actually allowing so many Chinese to fill up all the gaps, so you only got three spaces left for anybody else. Otherwise, actually you will end up with nothing if you keep doing what you are doing. (Staff-participant 6)

Some academics in the interviews believed that the university had a responsibility to guarantee that international students who were admitted had competent language skills and a good understanding of UK HE, in which case they would be ready for the forthcoming learning and life in the United Kingdom:

I think our university has to make sure that they (Chinese international students) need to have better knowledge about what they are coming for, they need to have better language skills, writing skills before they are accepted onto the course. (Staff-participant 2)

Therefore, the university was advised to focus more on pre-departure training, such as providing specialised training courses taught by British academics to those who are admitted but have not yet travelled to the United Kingdom. This way, the accepted international students are able to have an early exposure to British teaching and culture, besides improving their language competency:

For example, we have a college in Dalian, they (Chinese international students) spend some time in Dalian and then come here. They probably better prepared because they would be taught by British lecturers and staff, you know, more in English. I think before they come here, they get best English *and they can understand more about the way that we expect to learn, and be taught in here.* (Staff-participant 6)

These comments remind us of the importance of the university's support for mutual communication between Chinese students and academics. During the recruitment process or before the beginning of the course, Chinese students and academics barely meet each other physically. However, it seems that the university has only provided few channels by which the two sides might have meaningful interaction or communication before they meet face to face. It could be argued that facilitating student–teacher communications in advance of international students coming to the United Kingdom is beneficial in terms of managing the two parties' expectation of each other at an early stage. In this way, Chinese students would feel readier for learning in UK HE. More importantly, academics would also know more about the new Chinese students and therefore provide informed academic support to them.

Intercultural contact

Given the influence of intercultural contact on international students' intercultural adjustment, most academic interviewees expected the university to organise more social activities, engaging people from different cultures:

I think the student union can help with this by organising more social activities and encouraging Chinese students to take part. (Staff-participant 1)

I would have thought that the university should provide activities where students from different backgrounds can meet. It is quite a pity that there are not much chance to meet people from Britain. (Staff-participant 3)

However, academic interviewees disagreed with student interviewees in some aspects concerning how to facilitate intercultural contact. These discrepancies provide additional evidence for the necessity of mutual communication, as student and academic interviewees need not necessarily share a similar understanding on how intercultural contact should be supported in an academic setting.

First, there is disagreement about whether teachers should interfere with coursework-group arrangements to ensure a mix of nationalities among group members. According to one staff-participant, teacher intervention was in advisable:

As a teacher, I don't agree with letting teachers step in. I think some students want to do group work with foreigners. However, there are also some students who just want to finish group work with friends. So teachers can encourage students to mix up the group, but not interfere. (Staff-participant 1)

Second, in contrast to some student interviewees feeling that they were not well informed of social activities organised by the university, Staff-participant 2 deemed that plenty of Chinese students did not make good use of existing activities, even though they were aware of their availability. He explained that some Chinese students were not sufficiently at ease to break down the barriers and mix with people from different cultures. His explanation should be interpreted with some caution, because it seems to depend on his assumptions, rather than on transparent communication with those Chinese students regarding what stopped them from engaging in the existing social activities:

I think the university does put things in place. But the problem for many, though, is they have seen things in place, but some students feel they do not want to access them or there is a psychological bit, if you like…they feel comfortable mixing with their own people. There are university societies and clubs where you can meet other people who are not Chinese. You know, they are available and the university supports them. So the student also has to take actions for things and take advantage of things that are available. (Staff-participant 2)

Some academic interviewees were involved in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) language course currently run by the university for international students. Aiming to promote intercultural interaction, they recommended that the university should expand the course content by adding more culture-related material. In this case, the course was believed to smooth over many difficulties confronting international students in the United Kingdom, because it makes them more familiar with British culture:

We do provide English language support to students, so they get more comfortable with their studies. But hopefully also in a wider life while they are here. (Staff-participant 3)

Maybe ultimately we need to integrate more students this year to have more British culture content in the EAP. They seem to like it, which is strange because it is actually farther away from tangible assessment-led stuff than EAP would be. So maybe we just need to do more of that. They can get this baseline stuff they can talk about, stuff they can understand, stuff they can talk to people with. (Staff-participant 4)

5. Discussion

Following on from the presentation of the quantitative and qualitative data, this chapter discusses the insights and inferences drawn from these results. It seeks a convergence of the contrasting types of results and detailed explanations offered by qualitative results with the main quantitative findings.

This chapter will begin with in-depth discussions of student- and staff-participants' perceptions of HE service quality. Section 5.1 strives to explain why the student-participants attached a positive I-P gap (higher Importance scores and lower Performance scores) to the service quality of the HE provided by their university. Before interpreting the IPA results in section 5.3, section 5.2 will discuss the differences and consistencies between the two groups of participants' service quality perceptions.

This chapter will then discuss Chinese students' intercultural adjustment to the UK. Section 5.4 will explore the identified positive relationship between student-participants' perceptions of sociocultural adjustment and their perceptions of service quality of the academic factor. In light of the qualitative findings, section 5.4 will try to explain why the level of psychological adjustment reported by student-participants was statistically and significantly higher than that of their sociocultural adjustment.

It was found that collected quantitative data cannot support the hypothesised U-curve change pattern of service quality and intercultural adjustment with passing time. Within the context of this study, the last section of this chapter will propose some explanations to account for this important finding.

5.1. Reasons for the student perception of service quality

One of the main findings of this research is that the perceptions of student-participants are divergent from those held by academic participants when service quality of HE is under evaluation. Specifically, student-participants scored a statistically significant and positive importance-performance (I-P) gap for the HE offerings at their present host university in the United Kingdom. Their perceptions of service quality were not statistically different across gender categories and the levels of study. By contrast, there is no statistically significant difference between the importance and performance scores from the perspectives of staff-participants. This implies that the general level of service quality of HE offerings at the investigated university lived up to what the academic respondents had expected.

The above-mentioned findings infer a quality 'deficit' (Angell et al., 2008) in HE service from the perspective of student-participants. It suggests that the host university needs to make more effort to perform at the level that meets or goes beyond what student-participants expect to experience in UK HE. The student-perceived service quality gap is affected neither by their gender nor their level of study. The evaluations by academic staff participants, however, display a different picture – HE offerings were as good as the expected level at the university where they were working.

These findings are important from at least two angles. First, they raise the question with regard to possible reasons for the perceptions of student-respondents; that is, why the students thought that the service quality at their host university was lower than they had expected. The identification of the I-P (or service quality) gaps is not to show an astonishing picture where the student participants' actual educational experience in their current university did not live up to what they had expected to experience. Its more profound importance is presenting and understanding the student participants' key academic concerns, which are useful for locating areas where improvement is needed to address some of these concerns, or where resources could be better allocated (Kingston and Forland, 2008; Oldfield & Baron, 2000). Moreover, having a closer look at international students' academic expectations and subsequent experience is helpful to understand their intercultural experience containing the psychological, sociocultural and educational aspects (Zhou and Todman, 2009).

Second, the identified gaps between the student participants' and the staff participants' views reinforce the rationale for engaging not only students but teachers in this study: as two important HE stakeholders with constant interaction with each other during the education process, students and teachers may hold disparate perceptions about the quality of the HE offering at the same university. As Hills and Thom (2005) suggested, "it would be a mistake to forget that students and teachers do not always see, to describe, the same phenomenon in the same terms" (p.332). Comparing the perceptions of international students with those of academics of the host university and presenting any resulting consistency or gaps can help the two sides understand each other, and highlight the significance of "mutual efforts from all participants to learn about, understand and appreciate others' cultures and their interpretations of learning and reciprocally to learn with and from others" (Jin and Cortazzi, 2001, p.1).

In terms of why overall service quality, in student-participants' eyes, is not as good as they expected, one possible reason is the reported under-achievement of the university regarding the *academic* factor; or in *teacher quality,* to be specific.

A closer examination of the quantitative results reveals that the involved university, in the eyes of student-participants, is underperforming in three out of four aspects of HE, namely the *academic*, *cost* and *industry-link* factors. However, the academic factor was awarded the highest level of importance. This means that the levels of importance assigned (by student-participants) to the cost and industry-link factor were not as high as that of the academic factor in terms of their respective contribution to quality HE.

These results from the perceptions of student-respondents replicate the findings of the study by Angell et al. (2008), from which the service quality measures used by the current research were borrowed. Examining the perceptions of 365 postgraduate students from the social science and business faculties of a UK university, the research of Angell et al. demonstrates that a service quality deficit existed in all but the *leisure* factor, and that the academic aspect was also deemed to be the most significant service quality factor. Nevertheless, the service quality insufficiency, as such, in the academic factor was not consistent with the statement by Church (1982) that international students tend to feel more satisfied with the academic aspect than the non-academic or social aspects of the host university. Providing support for the current research, the study by Kwan and Ng (1999) found that Chinese students value most highly the quality of academic-related factor, such as teaching materials for the course or how the course content could prepare them for their future career. Many previous researchers interested in service quality have emphasised academic-related factors more than other relevant aspects (e.g., the administrative aspects) of HE service (e.g., Athiyaman, 1997, Cuthbert, 1996; Griemel-Fuhrmann and Geyer, 2003; Hampton, 1993).

Qualitative data from the student interviewees confirmed the paramount role of the academic-related factor. Five themes emerged from students' answers to the question concerning the influencing factors of UK HE service quality*: teacher quality, fellow student quality, learning atmosphere, tangibles* and *career support.* The first three seem to have a direct bearing on the academic life of students. The student interviewees unanimously discussed the physical characteristics of a university (i.e., tangibles) in terms of their primary function to facilitate student learning and teaching. With regard to the fifth theme, more industry contact was expected to be provided by the academic, rather than the non-academic, staff at the university. Students' explanations about the last two themes reinforced the central position of teaching and learning in their evaluation of service quality (Clewes, 2003). In general, the five themes echo the quantitative findings that the academic-related factor was regarded by the student-participants in this study as the most important contributor to HE service quality. Moreover, they offered detailed insights into what constitutes the 'academic-related' factor in the eyes of student-participants.

Among the five emerged themes, it is *teacher quality* that received considerable discussion from student interviewees. It is noticeable that this theme is also seen in the views of the academic interviewees, although the two groups attached different content to this common theme (as discussed later). Similar findings were evident in the studies by Cuthbert (1996) and O'Neill and Palmer (2004), in which the tangibility aspect enjoyed the highest performance score, but the quality of service encounter ranked highest in terms of its importance. Lovelock (1983) and Oldfield and Baron (2000) believe that, for professional services involving a high level of personal contact, those at the heart of service delivery are of unparalleled importance to customers, and are often evaluated by them. In an HE context, where teacher–student interaction is a key element of the learning and teaching process, it seems sensible to assume that the quality of teachers has determining effects on students' perceptions of service quality. In fact, the existing literature has provided substantial support for such an assumption. As Pozo-Munoz et al. (2000) likewise claim, 'teaching staff are key actors in a university's work' (p.253). Hill et al. (2003) suggest that, according to the perceptions of the student-participants whom they recruited, the quality of lecturers makes the greatest contribution to the provision of high-quality education. They also explain that lecturer quality is linked, but not exclusively, to course delivery in the classroom, feedback to students and the relationship with students.

In summary, the quantitative and qualitative findings of this research consistently suggest that the academic-related aspect is the most important factor for HE service. Both student and academic interviewees pinpointed teacher quality as the contributor of the utmost importance to the academic-related factor, although the composition of teacher quality is not identical for the two groups. Thus, it seems logical to infer that the quality of the teacher plays the foremost role in participants' evaluations of service quality.

An intensive examination of service quality attributes reveals that those related to teachers or their teaching (items 1, 3, 5, 9 and 14) were all scored with quality insufficiency (i.e., a statistically significant and positive I-P gap) by the student-participants. For example, the attributes with the top three positive gaps are: having practical skills taught in course (M_{I-P} =.91); having skilled and engaging teachers for courses (M_{I-P} =.57); and having easily transferable skills taught (M_{I-P}=.47). Given the paramount significance of teacher quality to academic aspects, the identified quality insufficiency in these relevant items provides quantitative explanations for why student-participants felt that their expectations of the academic factor were not met by the university.

A second potential reason for student-participants' service quality perceptions is their high expectations of UK HE, formed in advance of their actual learning experiences in the United Kingdom. Hill (1995) maintains that 'service expectations play a key role regarding the quality perceptions which consumers ultimately develop' (p.13). Previous studies have shown that students' decisions to withdraw from HE can be traced back to their expectations of HE and the first few weeks of enrolment (Prugsamatz et al., 2002). Nevertheless, the source of student expectation formation is still a moot issue in the existing literature. When it comes to international students, the nature of their expectations tends to be even more complex to investigate (Lobo and Gurney, 2014). Overall, the expectations of international students were found to be more different from their actual experiences than those of domestic students (Khawaja and Dempsey, 2008; Sherry et al., 2004). Bobakus and Boller (1992) even claimed that people are inclined to give higher scores to their expectations and lower scores to their experiences.

Given the two above-mentioned potential reasons for the identified expectation-experience gaps, be it the investigated university's inadequate performance or the unrealistically high expectations that some of the student participants' processed, it is arguable that the overall aim of investigating service quality being to understand and bridge the gaps, improve the quality of HE, and help enhance teaching and learning (Barnes, 2007). In order to achieve this, a more efficient communication strategy should be developed with engagement of all parts of universities (Gray et al., 2003). Having explicitly mapped the student/staff participants' educational expectations against their experiences and identified gaps, the study can be a starting point that will facilitate more meaningful communications between at least two parties – international students and academics. It allows them to know transparently about what is expected by the other side (Salter-Dvorak, 2004). Moreover, it can lead to more focused communications between these two sides on why these gaps exist (e.g., is it because students' unrealistic expectations? If so, where are these unrealistic expectations? Or is it because of the university's or teachers' insufficient awareness and performance?), and more importantly on how to bridge them in reality through mutual efforts and what support is needed from the university.

Indicated by the qualitative results of this research, the status of 'international student' seems to underpin student-participants' expectations of UK HE. Particular to this status is first their desire to overcome the language barrier by improving their English skills in UK HE. The emerged theme – *learning atmosphere* – manifests that many student interviewees value the provision of a facilitating environment for the sake of enhancing their English competency. One interviewee reported that most of her classmates were from China and most of the time in-class discussions were in Chinese rather than English. An English learning environment, as such, negatively influenced her motivation to attend lectures. In the case of this particular interviewee, the gap may be inevitable because the English learning environment in the academic setting turned out to be a different picture from what she had expected. Under the theme *teacher quality*, two interviewees discussed their struggles due to some lecturers' strong accents, which is another language challenge for their learning in an alien academic environment. Regarding *fellow student quality,* student interviewees emphasised that it is important for the university to accept international students only if they have sufficient English language competency. Otherwise, learning in UK HE will be very difficult.

All the above-mentioned findings imply that overcoming the language barrier occupies a crucial position in the HE expectations of the student interviewees. Supportively, the study conducted by Campbell and Li (2008) points to mastering the English language as one of the greatest barriers and concerns for Asian students in New Zealand. The language barrier creates additional difficulties for the learning of Asian students in the host country, such as hindering them from effective communication with teachers or fellow students and comprehension of lecture content and instructions, as well as the assessment criteria. Lobo and Gurney (2014) similarly state that unmet student expectations might be due to a set of stressors aligned with their status as international students, where language difficulty is included in these stressors. Believed by international students to be vital for their accomplishment of HE in an English medium university, the acquisition of sufficient English competency for academic purpose has confounding effects on these stressors (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002).

Apart from English language barrier, a lack of familiarity with academic life in UK HE also appears to be particular to the student-participants' status as international students. According to the quantitative results, the majority of the student-respondents (55.3%) have no more than six months of learning experiences in UK HE, and 61.9% of them are registered on a one-year postgraduate taught programme. A combination of these descriptive quantitative results implies that most student-participants come to the United Kingdom directly after their undergraduate studies in Chinese HE and that their familiarity with how learning is expected in the United Kingdom tends to be limited. The qualitative results nevertheless suggest that it is the academic interviewees, rather than student interviewees themselves, who were more concerned with the importance of understanding accurately and sufficiently about how learning is expected in UK universities.

When advocating *expectation communication between the teacher and student*, the academic interviewees frequently mentioned that their expectation was that Chinese international students would be more aware of the differences between learning in China and the United Kingdom, and would obtain accurate and sufficient knowledge about academic conventions in UK HE. Some examples of academic conventions in UK universities given by the academic interviewees were being an independent learner, acquiring critical thinking skills and acquainting oneself with the scope and design of courses for the registered programme. These examples tend to be culture-laden and normally neither explicit nor easy to be instructed in class (Durkin, 2011). In this sense, they are different from what Ward and Masgoret (2004) have listed as the five top academic challenges that international students face: namely, 'making oral presentations;' 'taking tests or exams'; 'expressing yourself in English'; 'expressing opinions to the teacher'; and 'writing assignments'. Ward and Masgoret's list contains aspects that are usually overtly required of students. With recognition of the academic challenges that many Chinese students encounter in western countries, Durkin (2011, p.8) further question that "whether it is possible, or indeed appropriate, for western academia to consider adapting the Western style of critical discourse" into Chinese students' study overseas. He argues that Chinese students, coming from a culture that is quite different from the western culture, might be disadvantaged by UK lecturers' emphasis on western culture-laden terms such as 'critical discourse' or 'critical thinking'. By contrast, Durkin proposed a 'middle way' which encourages "U.K. lecturers and Chinese students could move closer together in their expectations and thinking, without either group abnegating their unique cultural identities and beliefs" (Ibid., p.16-17). In terms of the current study, the expectation communication between teachers and international students seems to have great potential to be the starting point for the development of Durkin's 'middle way' strategy. Some practical suggestions to best facilitate communications as such in reality are provided in Section 6.5.

Given a lack of knowledge about UK HE as raised by the teacher interviewees, it seems plausible to understand further why the student-participants of this research did not speak highly of the general quality of HE service offering by their university. Their expectations, with limited knowledge about how learning is expected in UK HE, are very likely to be incongruent with reality and the consequent gaps contribute to their quality perceptions (Barnes, 2007). These gaps, in turn, justify the need for and the importance of student–teacher expectation communications that all the academic interviewees have called for in this research. The participants of Barnes' (2007) research were postgraduate Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom. Thus, the results of that research provide a reference for the current research, since the majority of student-participants were also postgraduate Chinese students. Barnes argues that the main reason for the expectation-experience gap in his participants' perceptions is a shortage of experience and knowledge of UK HE and of life in the United Kingdom in general. The qualitative data from that research support how 'students imagine the picture in the United Kingdom to be much better than in China, but in reality the difference may not be as apparent. Therefore, to some extent, the gaps may be inevitable…' (p.327).

The insufficiency in international students' knowledge of academic conventions in the host country is not rare. Campbell and Li (2008) found that Asian students encountered many challenges in academic setting of New Zealand due to their unfamiliarity with academic conventions. The research of Furrer et al. (2000) provides cultural perspectives to interpret the existence of gaps between international students' pre-formed expectations and their actual learning experiences in the host country. It shows that the importance of each service quality dimension attached by customers is subject to their cultural backgrounds. Another example of cultural effects on service quality perceptions is the research of Mattila (1999), who concludes that Asian students value the hedonic aspects to a lesser degree in their service quality evaluation than those from Western cultures. This conclusion is supported by the findings of this current research. The quantitative results demonstrate that the involved Chinese international student, regardless of their gender and level of study, deem the *leisure* dimension to be the least important for UK HE service quality. Additionally, in articulating the influential factors for quality UK HE, the student interviewees mentioned no leisure-related aspects.

5.2 Comparisons between student and teacher perceptions of service quality

Although both groups of participants gave the highest level of importance to the academic aspect of HE service and that *teacher quality* emerged as a common theme, there are many differences between the perceptions of service quality for students and teachers.

These differences are first manifested in the quantitative results: while student-participants perceived HE service quality at their university to be insufficient in relation to their expectations, the views of academic respondents were more positive. Concrete differences are displayed in the qualitative results. Five themes surfaced from students' views about what affects HE service quality: *teacher quality, fellow student quality, learning atmosphere, tangibles* and *career support.* However, only two themes – *teacher quality* and *expectation communication between the teacher and student* – emerged from the opinions of the academic interviewees. It is remarkable that *teacher quality* is shared in the views of both groups, and offers concrete explanations for one important quantitative finding: both groups of questionnaire respondents attached the utmost importance to the academic factor.

To dig further into the similarities and differences between the two groups' service quality perceptions of the same university, the distinction between functional and technological service quality (Gronroos, 1984) may conceivably interpret the themes that emerged. Gronroos argues that the quality of a service is made up of two dimensions: *technical quality,* dealing with *what* the customer gets, and functional quality, relating to *how* he gets it. Although the technical outcome resulting from a service has a great influence on a customer's service quality evaluation, it is not sufficient for the total quality, in his perception, because he will also consider the delivery process of that service. The importance of both dimensions should be acknowledged across all types of services (Oldfield and Baron, 2000). In the context of HE, technical quality refers to the 'relatively quantifiable aspects of the university service offer' (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004, p.41).

5.2.1 The common theme in student and teacher perceptions

Informed by Gronroos (1984), the finding of a theme (i.e., teacher quality) shared by the students' and academics' perceptions suggests that the two groups of HE participants are likely to pay close attention to the process of HE delivery. Gronroos (1988) maintained in a later article that technical aspects of a service are more likely to be duplicated, so that the advantages of these aspects are easily lost. On the other hand, functional aspects have the potential to make a service competitive yet unique. During the service delivery process, characteristics of customer-contact employees, such as their professionalism, attitudes and motivation, can make a big difference to customers' perception of service quality (Lee et al., 2000). Higher education, in particular, is a context where the people element is extremely relevant (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2003; Mazzarol, 1998; Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Patterson et al., 1998). At the core of the teaching and learning process is teacher–student interaction, on which the impact of the teacher is significant (Hill et al., 2003; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2003). Darling-Hammond (2000) argues that institutions can contribute to student learning, and a large portion of that contribution is credited to teachers. In the current research, participants' shared concern about the quality of the teachers provides additional evidence for the importance of teachers to the HE process and to the quality of student learning experience.

With regard to teacher quality, the student and academic interviewees both addressed the importance of teaching. Interpreting quality teaching, some academic interviewees pointed out that academics' possession of cutting-edge knowledge in field is especially necessary. Student interviewees expressed similar views by emphasising teachers' academic competence. A body of previous studies supports these findings. For example, Hill et al. (2003) found that students valued teachers who are knowledgeable, enthusiastic, caring about learning needs of students and helpful in moving students' knowledge forward. Expertise was deemed as the most importance attribute of teachers (Voss et al., 2007). The studies carried out by Pozo-Munoz et al. (2000) and Brown (2004) suggest that, in students' perceptions, competency is the by far the most vital characteristic of good teachers, and being knowledgeable should be the foremost aspect of competency.

Regarding teacher quality, three academic interviewees particularly highlighted the relationship between the motivation of teachers to teaching and the quality of teaching that they can offer. They advised the involved university to pay more attention to this matter for the promotion of HE quality. Half of the academic interviewees pointed out that a strong research orientation in the evaluation of academics' promotion applications bears much of the responsibility for the phenomenon whereby some academics make more effort to conduct research rather than ensure or improve their teaching quality. This point echoes the quantitative results that academic respondents scored the attribute *My university has skilled and engaging teachers to teach courses* with the least desirable service quality in relation to their expectations. Elton (1998) deems quality teaching to be central to excellence in HE. He maintains that some academics have to change their attitude, because they tend to consider themselves more as professors or lecturers than teachers or student-learning facilitators. Academics as such usually prioritise research tasks over teaching. The comments made by the three academic interviewees of this research also support the argument of Dill and Soo (2005) and Pozo-Munoz et al. (2000) that although teaching, in many university teachers' minds, suffers from a loss of lustre, especially compared to research, it should be a fundamental activity worthy of close attention from every university teacher.

5.2.2 Different themes in student and teacher perceptions

Compared to the views of student interviewees, those expressed by academics appear to have a higher level of alignment with the functional quality proposed by Gronroos (1984). This is for two reasons. First, apart from teacher quality, the academics involved in this research placed strong emphasis on the importance of expectation communications between the student and teacher for a quality HE service. Such communications contribute greatly to interactions between students and teachers and are aligned closely to the learning and teaching process. On the other hand, the student interviewees paid particular attention to factors external to teacher–student interactions, such as the influence of fellow student quality or the learning atmosphere jointly fostered by a range of HE participators. The second reason is that the student interviewees had concerns about the career support available in UK universities. This aspect has a direct relationship to their career prospects after graduation, and is oriented to the outcome of their overseas learning in UK HE. The quantitative results of this research confirm that the career-related factor (*industry-link*) is very important for student-participants (M=3.95 on a 5-point Likert scale). Actually, the influences of this aspect are noticeable as early as when international students are deciding which host country or host institution to apply to (Chen, 2006; Maringe and Carter, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

It could be argued that the student interviewees' attention to factors external to teacher–student interactions reflect a deficiency in the model of Gronroos (1984; 1988). When advocating an equal, if not higher, importance of service process in relation to service outcome, Gronroos focused mainly on interactions between customers and service deliverers, and overlooked the influence of other customers in the service process (Oldfield and Baron, 2000). The emphasis on guaranteeing the quality of fellow students manifests that, in the perceptions of student-participants, other students do play a remarkable role in determining the quality of their educational experience in UK HE. To ensure fellow-student quality, the investigated university was expected to set up a reasonably more demanding recruitment threshold for potential international applicants (Student-participant 3) or to have regular assessments with a higher standard (Student-participants 3 and 4). These means to improve fellow-student quality, nevertheless, seem to be easily 'quantifiable' (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004). For instance, when elaborating how the university could work on improving fellow-student quality (section 4.2.3.1), Student-participant 5 suggested increasing the IELTS score requirement for the admission of international students, and Student participants 1 and 5 advised that the numbers recruited need to be cut.

The concentration by academic interviewees on teacher–student interaction and on functional service quality is first evident in the theme of *teacher quality*, a crucial contributor to the teaching and learning process, thus to the quality of HE service. This aspect has been discussed in the previous section.

The theme of *expectation communication between the teacher and student* also helps to display academic interviewees' concern about the HE process. Apart from Staff-participant 2, all the involved academics suggested that it would beneficial for learning and teaching if the expectations of international students are communicated and managed at an early stage through mutual expectation communications, by which means Chinese international students would be more able to compare and understand the difference between HE in China and the United Kingdom, and thus form more accurate expectations of their learning experiences in United Kingdom. Based on such communications, the expectations of academic staff concerning their students from China might also be managed. According to Gronroos (1984), the evaluation of functional quality cannot be as objective as of technical quality, and to ensure an acceptable quality of service delivery process tends to be very demanding for contact personnel.

The call by academic interviewees for more frequent and two-way expectation communications supports the possibility of one explanation (discussed in section 5.1) for student-participants' service quality perceptions. That explanation illustrates that students' feelings of insufficient service quality of HE might be due to their inaccurate or high expectations. Such expectations were likely to be formed from a lack of familiarity with academic life in UK HE. Insufficient student–teacher expectation communications at the moment could be one underlying reason why the academic interviewees of this research felt that there is a wide gap between their Chinese students' HE expectations and the actual reality.

Previous research provides substantial support for the importance of understanding and managing students' expectations of HE. Researchers in various fields seem to reach a consensus that comprehending and managing students' expectations are linked to an improvement of their satisfaction and engagement with the HE service (Bordia et al., 2011; Robledo, 2001). The empirical research conducted by Hampton (1993) offers evidence for a relationship between students' overall evaluation of HE service quality and the expectation-experience gaps in their perceptions: a wider gap as a consequence of higher expectations, while insufficient experiences in reality are associated with a lower level of overall evaluation with the quality of HE offered by the university.

In addition to the support from previous research, the increasing diversity in the student population of UK HE, that is, the greater percentage of international students, could also be a driving force to study student expectations. Hill (1995) asserts that there is no acknowledgement-by-all performance measures for HE to date. Given that students are nowadays deemed to be the 'primary customers' of HE, 'one approach to service quality management which to some extent circumvents the performance measure difficulty, would be attempting to align, as closely as possible, students' expectations with their perceptions of service performance' (ibid., p.13). For UK universities, the existence of international students, on its own, is far from sufficient to ensure pleasant HE experiences that are also international, if the teaching and the curriculum are not developed to accommodate the diversity of student learning needs and expectations (Maringe and Carter, 2007). Learning from students themselves by means of mutual communications seem to be a privileged way for academics to comprehend students' HE expectations, and vice versa. This reflects on inclusive teaching Cadman (2000), Hellsten and Prescott (2004) and Lea et al. (2003) uphold; that is, taking into account both teachers' and students' concerns in teaching and curriculum design. Inclusive teaching with a good balance between the expectations of the two parties has the potential to boost the commitment of both (Lea et al., 2003).

In summary, the theme – *expectation communication between the teacher and student* – emerging from the views of academic interviewees is significant for at least three reasons. In the first place, it reinforces the results of a body of previous research, demonstrating that managing student expectations has the potential to improve their HE experience and perceptions of service quality. Second, it goes beyond previous research findings by advocating a higher level of teacher commitment or input to the communications. To be truly mutual, academics were expected to reflect on their own expectations, be willing to listen to and know more about the student, and most importantly to be open to managing their own expectations whenever needed for the sake of a better teaching and learning experience. Third, it has practical implications for teaching in UK HE, where the student composition and student expectations have become increasingly diverse, and where a consensus on the criteria for HE performance is still absent.

Thus, two points relating to this theme need to be clarified here. First, the expectation communications advocated by academic participants should be reciprocal, rather than unidirectional. This means that both teachers and students should strive to comprehend each other's expectations. If this is the case, not only are Chinese international students more able to understand what is expected of them by their teachers at UK universities, but also UK academics are in a better position to understand international students' expectations of the learning experience in UK HE and to facilitate their learning. As Staff-participant 6 highlighted, 'quality is two-way. So the student has the responsibility as well as academics. And I think there needs to be a clear understanding of what is expected from each side'. Reciprocal expectation communications embody the call for joint efforts by both academic staff of the host university and by international students (Zhou and Todman, 2009), culture synergy (Zhou et al., 2008) and the student-centred learning approach promoted by Lea et al. (2003). Lea et al. argue that underlying student-centred learning should be 'mutual respect within the learner–teacher relationship, and a reflexive approach to the learning and teaching process on the part of both teacher and learner' (ibid., p.322).

The second point worth further awareness is that the importance of expectation communications between teachers and students should be more profound than simply satisfying student needs to compete successfully in the student market. There is no doubt that certain expectations of some Chinese international students, such as those whose learning experiences in and understanding of UK HE are very limited, could not be accommodated in practice. This may be because of the feasibility of those expectations in the UK context, or 'pedagogical or resource limitations' (Sander et al., 2000, p.321). Sander et al. also stress that room for change in HE provision does not mean that the change should be automatically directed by student expectations. Mutual expectation communications perhaps open up an innovative channel, through which teachers/students could reflect on their own expectations, understand the expectations of the other side and manage those unrealistic teacher/student expectations to an effective level that facilitates teaching and learning. Therefore, the theme – *expectation communication between teacher and student* – that emerged from academic interviewees' opinions may have far-reaching significance for UK HE. It conveys a strong message that academics and Chinese international students are more likely to attain a 'mutually desired outcome' by working together more closely and communicating more effectively (Robertson et al., 2000, p.101).

5.3 Interpretation of IPA results

The results of IPA reveal a non-identical picture of service quality of HE provided by the investigated university. Although the two groups of participants perceived that their actual learning/teaching experience were less good than their expectations, the academic factor fell into the 'Keep up the Good Work' quadrant deemed to be the 'ideal' section in the importance-performance matrix (Joseph and Joseph, 1997). On the other hand, the results regarding the leisure factor seem more consistent. It was perceived by the two groups of participants to be the least important factor of the three. However, it attained the highest level of service quality evaluation. Not surprisingly, the leisure factor fell into the 'Possible Overkill' quadrant. Differences between student- and staff-participants' quality perceptions were also displayed in IPA: while the students expected their current university to concentrate on cost-related aspects in future, academic participants gave low priority to these aspects.

Given its being rated as of the utmost importance by the two groups of participants for HE service quality, it is reasonable to explore further the implications of the role of the academic factor in the IP grid. Its location in the 'Keep up the Good Work' quadrant indicates that participants of this research, for various reasons, felt satisfied about the academic-related aspects offered by their university. By contrast, their service quality perceptions implied that they expected still further improvement in this factor in the future because there was a gap between their academic expectations and their academic experiences in reality.

These results could be interpreted from the lens of 'zone of tolerance' (Ford et al., 1999; Joseph and Joseph, 1997; Voss et al., 2007; Zeithaml et al., 1993). Zeithaml et al. (1993) divided customer expectations of service quality into three categories: desire service; adequate service; and predicted service. The desired service is what customers wish to receive from the service provider. It includes what they believe should and could be performed by the provider. Nevertheless, customers are aware of the possibility that the desired service will not always be provided. So they set up an adequate level of service in their expectations to represent the minimal and essential service that they want to receive. The variation between the desired and adequate service is the 'zone of tolerance' that customers are willing to accept, on the condition that the minimal level is met. Lastly, the predicted service depends on customers' predictions about what is to be offered by the service provider.

In the HE context, Oldfield and Baron (2000) identify three factors underlying the 24 tested variables. They are the requisite, acceptable and functional factors. Similar to the desirable service, variables in the acceptable category were those 'being desirable but not essential' in the course of students' academic experience (p.89). The requisite factor resembles the adequate service expectations in that it is made up of attributes essential to the completion of students' study. The third factor, the functional factor, refers to a utilitarian or practical nature, so it is remarkably different from the predicted service. The research of Ford et al. (1999) is an example to show the possible existence of zone of tolerance in student service quality perceptions. In the case of the New Zealand sample comprising business students, the vast majority (67%) revealed to a varying extent their satisfaction with their general HE learning experience. The average satisfaction level was 3.75 on a five-point scale. However, insufficient university performance in relation to participants' expectations was perceived to be evident in all HE service factors apart from that concerning the location of the evaluated university. Ford et al. suggest that there is 'a range of reasonable service provision within which the customer will be forgiving but, after the limit is reached, the customer will be dissatisfied' (p.178).

Coming back to the current research, both the student and the academic participants possibly deemed that the performance of their university in terms of academic aspects was at least at the adequate or requisite level; hence, they placed the academic factor into the 'Keep up the Good Work' section. Nevertheless, when it comes to the service quality of this factor, they still looked forward to much better academic experiences in future. In other words, they expected further improvement in the performance of their university regarding this matter: perhaps the university could go beyond the adequate or requisite level toward the desirable or acceptable level. The zone of tolerance might be one reason why participants in this research perceived an insufficiency in service quality of the academic factor while locating it in the 'Keep up the Good Work' section of the IP grid.

The zone of tolerance also reminds us of the advantages of IPA. Best regarded as a relative measure of service quality, IPA provides an additional lens of evaluators' relative value of different quality attributes/factors compared to absolute performance measures (Martilla and James, 1977). This advantage makes IPA a good technique in terms of offering strategic advice to universities on where to allocate limited resources (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004; Soutar and McNeil, 1996). It is anticipated that working on the attributes/factors of the maximal importance will efficiently improve HE service quality in terms of general and customer satisfaction. By contrast, less important attributes/factors tend to have less impact on people's service quality perceptions.

In the context of this research, if looking at the absolute performance score of the academic factor, the mean scores 3.88 and 4.32 on a five-point scale as scored respectively by student- and staff-participants conveys a message: the university under evaluation is doing well in academic-related aspects. Meanwhile, the 'Keep up the Good Work' location verifies that participants are not unhappy with the service quality of these aspects provided by their university.

It is, however, noteworthy that the good performance of the academic factor did not bring about consistently positive service quality evaluations from participants. The two groups of participants believed that their actual academic experiences were not as good as they had expected to experience at the current university. As discussed above, one interpretation could be that the university under discussion might have achieved more than the adequate service expectations of the participants. Therefore, they placed the academic factor into the first quadrant of the IP grid and gave it a good absolute performance score. Nevertheless, there is still certain distance between status quo and the ideal level of quality that they wished their university to achieve.

Being the most critical aspect for the general service quality, theoretically speaking the academic factor exerts the greatest influence on students' and teachers' feelings about the quality of the HE offerings. An improvement in respect of this matter would have the most potential to prompt more positive evaluations from the two groups of HE stakeholders. Under these circumstances, it is advisable for the investigated university to allocate more resources to students' and teachers' academic experience, even though the quality is perceived to be at the essential level. Thus, striving to bridge the zone of tolerance in participants' minds is strongly recommended for the investigated university for the future.

It could also be argued that neither the relative position of HE attributes/factors in the IP grid nor the absolute position in a scale can disclose the whole picture of the HE experiences of stakeholders (e.g., students and teachers). Soutar and McNeil (1996) and Abdullah (2006a, b) are opposed to the current use of performance indicators in HE. They maintain that those indicators have something do to with the provision of HE but are definitely not comprehensive in terms of measuring HE quality. By contrast, service quality measures have the advantage of providing additional information on what stakeholders expect of their HE experiences. Such additional formation also has the benefit of pinpointing the most critical higher education attributes/factors in the eyes of the stakeholders (Cuthbert, 1996; O'Neill and Palmer, 2004). The size and the direction of the perceived service quality gap, thus, offer a potential means to understand the provision of HE in a more comprehensive and elaborate way.

5.4 Perceptions of intercultural adjustment

In addition to service quality of HE, the perceptions of participants regarding the intercultural adjustment achieved by Chinese international students in the United Kingdom were also investigated. It has to be acknowledged that students' perceptions of their own intercultural adjustment to the host country vary in many aspects, being subject to influence from a wide range personal and contextual factors and the interactions between them (e.g., Gu, 2009; Gu et al., 2010). Coleman (2004) categorises these influential factors into internal and external factors. Examples include the length of study, subject or level of study, personality, motivation, learning style, language competency and financial status. However, there is also some evidence that it is not difficult to identify patterns of challenges or individual growth in international students' intercultural experiences (Taylor and Ali, 2017; Gu et al., 2010). The research under discussion contributes new support to the likely existence of such patterns, based on the mixed results from participants' perceptions regarding the intercultural adjustment experienced by Chinese students in the United Kingdom.

In general, compared to those concerning the service quality of HE provided by the involved university, the two groups' perceptions of intercultural adjustment appear to have a higher degree of consistency and complementarity.

In terms of what impacts on the intercultural adjustment attained by Chinese international students in the United Kingdom (Research Question 8), both the student and academic interviewees focused on the factors leading to challenges. The importance of acquiring a good level of *cultural knowledge* to facilitate the adjustment process was shared by the two groups of interviewees. In addition, interacting with people who are not from China was deemed especially beneficial. Nevertheless, both groups felt that having *intercultural contact* with non-Chinese is a challenge for many Chinese students. Student interviewees attempted to explain why they had such feelings: they believed that insufficient *language competence* and the barrier due to *cultural distance* often impeded them from doing so. By contrast, academic staff interviewees emphasised the phenomenon whereby Chinese students are inclined to have contact with their compatriots. Unlike their student counterparts, three academic interviewees also put forward Chinese students' *length of stay* in the United Kingdom as an influential factor for their intercultural adjustment.

In view of above themes, it seems that they are challenges faced exclusively by international students, rather than shared by local students. Furnham and Bochner (1986, cited in Zhou and Todman, 2009) point out that international students have to deal with two types of challenges that are particular to their international status. The first type includes language competence, loneliness in the host country and difficulties of social communications, while the second relates to the pressure of being regarded as a representative of their country in their interactions with local people. Back to the themes emerging from this research, the shortage of knowledge about British culture, the insufficient length of stay in the United Kingdom, the lack of confidence with language and the obstacles to intercultural contact because of differences between the home and host cultures, as well as the inclination to engage with the Chinese community, appear to provide support to the argument of Furnham and Bochner in a particular context – Chinese students pursuing HE at a Russell Group university.

5.4.1 The relationship between service quality and intercultural adjustment

According to the quantitative data collected from student-participants, there is no statistically significant correlation between the I-P gap score and intercultural adjustment. These results indicate that student-participants' perceptions of service quality of HE provided by their current university are not related to the level of intercultural adjustment that they believed that they had achieved in the United Kingdom. Thus, the hypothesised positive relationship between the two key concepts (Hypothesis 7) could not be supported by the data. Nevertheless, the I-P gap score of the academic factor was detected to be statistically and negatively related to sociocultural adjustment, implying that student-participants would adjust better to the UK sociocultural environment if the service quality of the academic aspects at their university is improved.

This identified relationship was explained in more depth by the qualitative interviews with students. A good many previous studies have suggested that *language competency*, *cultural distance* and *cultural knowledge* – the three themes abstracted from the student interview data – are powerful influencers of sociocultural adjustment (e.g., Gu, 2009; Gu et al., 2010; Searle and Ward, 1990; Straker, 2016; Taylor and Ali, 2017; Wang, 2016; Zhou et al., 2008). Events in international students' academic life can greatly impact on their intercultural and sociocultural adjustment in a complicated way, and vice versa (Taylor and Ali, 2017; Senyshyn et al., 2000; Zhang and Brunton, 2007). These qualitative results imply that the student-participants, when discussing their intercultural adjustment, paid more attention to factors influencing sociocultural adjustment. They also tended to relate their concerns about intercultural adjustment to their academic life.

Of students' greatest concern is their English competency. To be more accurate, they believed that being able to speak English well is a prerequisite for interaction with people from different cultures. As early as discussing the influential factors of HE service quality, student interviewees revealed that it is important for international students to immerse themselves in a facilitating language-learning environment on campus. One key and ideal characteristic of such learning environment is the provision of plenty of opportunities, especially within academic settings such as lectures or workshops, for intercultural communication in which English is used. For instance, Student-participant 1 linked a learning environment as such particularly to lectures, in which she wanted peer discussions to be in English as the communication medium. It seems to be reasonable to infer that Student-participant 1 was deeply concerned about the role of language competency in her interactions with non-Chinese individuals. To enhance her competency, she put a high level of emphasis on receiving language support from an encouraging academic environment fostered by the university. Having intercultural contact was found to be beneficial, particularly for sociocultural adjustment (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Church, 1982; Lewthwaite, 1996; Newsome and Cooper, 2016; Zheng, 2017; Zhou et al., 2008).

Besides English competency enhancement, student interviewees associated acquiring more knowledge about British culture and being more aware of differences between Chinese and British cultures with stimulating intercultural contact. Likewise, they indicated a strong and overt expectation of more support from the academic environment to facilitate their understanding of British culture. These results, again, help to explain why a positive relationship between sociocultural adjustment and service quality of academic-related aspects may be identified in the quantitative data provided by the students.

The views of academic interviewees complement the student-perceived positive (negative) relationship between sociocultural adjustment and service quality (I-P gap score) of academic-related aspects of HE. Through the theme of *length of stay,* for instance, three academics shared their concern that a large number of Chinese international students, especially those registered on a one-year Master's programme, study and live in the United Kingdom for a period of time that is too short to become well adjusted to British culture. Staff-participants 2 and 3 maintained that the quality and length of pre-sessional courses greatly impact on how smoothly Chinese students transition to British culture. They thought that the pre-sessional courses currently provided by their university were unfortunately not long enough, therefore the quality of these courses was not as high as they had expected.

Echoing the student-perceived importance of acquiring a wealth of knowledge about British culture, three of the six academics valued the attainment of sufficient understanding of how learning is expected to go in UK HE. They believed that academic culture is an integral part of British culture, and it is necessary for Chinese students to become aware of the differences between the British and Chinese academic cultures. Such an awareness was taken as an integral part of gaining knowledge about British culture and was considered beneficial to Chinese students' academic adaptation to UK HE. Ample evidence has supported that learning the host culture facilitates international students' intercultural adjustment to that host country (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Church, 1982; Gu, 2009; Searle and Ward, 1990). The three academic interviewees also indicated that Chinese students' academic adjustment to UK HE plays a special role in their intercultural adjustment. It makes a significant contribution to and is dramatically influenced by students' knowledge of the UK academic culture. Better academic adaption is likely to nurture a sense of belonging to the host university and to stimulate interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds, therefore exerting positive effects on their sociocultural adjustment (Glass and Westmont, 2014; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2016).

5.4.2 Comparisons between sociocultural and psychological adjustment

The work of Searle and Ward (1990) represents a well-received study in which the nature and predicting variables of international students' intercultural adjustment were examined. The two researchers argue that intercultural adjustment is made up of two interrelated yet distinct dimensions: sociocultural and psychological adjustment. The former is believed to be best understood through social learning theory, and the latter through the stress and coping framework. The social skills/culture learning theory supposes that the acquisition of social/cultural-specific skills is the most important, effective and appropriate to handle the new environment. Within this framework, behavioural aspects relating to contact with host nationals and social interactions are given strong emphasis (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Li and Gasser, 2005; Searle and Ward, 1990; Zhou et al., 2008). On the other hand, stress and coping theory concentrates on managing stress, due to dramatic and significant life changes, to obtain psychological wellbeing during the intercultural transition (Searle and Ward, 1990; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006).

Based on the work of Searle and Ward (1990), student-participants' self-perceived intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom was investigated through the survey and individual interviews. The views of the staff-participants regarding the same matter were also explored, but merely through the qualitative interviews.

The qualitative results of this research pinpoint another important quantitative finding that is in line with the argument of Searle and Ward: there is a statistically positive relationship between the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of intercultural adjustment in the collected quantitative data. Numerous studies support such a relationship between the two sub-dimensions. Better sociocultural adjustment and having local friends are often associated with a lower degree of stress, which in turn facilitates psychological wellbeing (Searle and Ward, 1990; Ward and Kennedy, 1994; Zhou and Todman, 2009). If a student is not actively engaged in regular social interaction, they are highly likely to nurture a sense of loneliness or isolation. As a consequence, a negative psychological state is highly likely to impinge on his/her intercultural adjustment.

The concept of intergroup anxiety advocated by Stephen and Stephen (1985) provides extra support for the identified positive sociocultural-psychological adjustment association. In contrast to the concept of culture shock (Oberg, 1960) delineating the psychological stress due to a loss of familiar social and cultural cues to guide interactions in a new culture, intergroup anxiety is extensive, because it 'includes interactions with members of different groups within a culture, as well as between cultures' (Stephen and Stephen, 1985, p.160). Negative interaction behaviours displayed by host nationals may nurture fear or anxiety in international students. Under such circumstances, they are likely to avoid intercultural interaction as a way to reduce intergroup anxiety. In the case of this research, the majority of student interviewees implied a sense of intergroup anxiety that, to a large extent, discouraged them from making friends with people not from China. For example, Student-participants 1 and 3 had a feeling that they had little in common with people from other cultures, so they reduced intercultural contact whenever possible, as a strategy. Although the explicit outcome was successful avoidance of interaction with people from different cultures, an implicit message from this situation is that the two student-participants' interaction behaviour was considerably affected by their fear of confronting and managing cultural distance.

The two cases of Student-participants 1 and 3 are enlightening in terms of understanding another quantitative finding of this research: when the two sub-categories of intercultural adjustment were compared, it was found that the student-respondents reported a significantly and slightly higher level of psychological adjustment (M=3.74) than sociocultural adjustment (M=3.66) to the United Kingdom.

As discussed in the previous section, the three themes emerging from the views of student interviewees on what affected their intercultural adjustment mainly concentrate on their challenges of having intercultural interactions. For example, under the theme of *language competency*, Student-participants 1 and 2 expressed their attempts to avoid communication with people from different countries due to low self-esteem regarding their English proficiency. Another example is Student-participant 3 feeling anxious about not being able to understand the jokes made by non-Chinese. His worries as such about cultural distance discouraged him from seeking or maintaining intercultural contact.

The primary concern revealed by student interviewees regarding their adjustment to the United Kingdom lies in the difficulty of intercultural contact. However, they seldom revealed experience of undue psychological stress associated with this concern. It could be inferred that they had strategically buffered their psychological stress through reducing their interaction with non-Chinese individuals, which provides a potential explanation for why the level of their self-evaluated sociocultural adjustment was found to be significantly lower than their psychological adjustment.

All academic interviewees discussed the phenomenon that they had observed whereby Chinese students displayed a strong tendency to interact and socialize, in both academic and non-academic settings, with their Chinese compatriots. They felt that this tendency was not very helpful to Chinese students' intercultural adjustment. For instance, Staff-participants 6 and 3 claimed that restricting their contact to the Chinese community negatively affects Chinese students' integration with local or European students, as well as their intercultural adjustment to the new cultural environment. Echoing students' worries about their own language competency, Staff-participant 2 believed that a lack of self-confidence among Chinese students concerning using English was an important reason for their evasion of contact with people from different countries.

In summary, it is reasonable to claim that there is both quantitative and qualitative evidence in this research supporting the complicated interrelationship between the two sub-dimensions of intercultural adjustment. There is also some qualitative evidence accounting for why student-participants scored a statistically lower level of sociocultural adjustment (in relation to psychological adjustment). As Searle and Ward (1990) underline, although sociocultural and psychological adjustment are distinct and are primarily affected by different kinds of variables, they are not totally exclusive of each other.

5.4.3 Intercultural contact and sociocultural adjustment

The above discussions so far on the two groups of participants' perceptions of intercultural adjustment seem to be surrounded by a salient issue: the relationship between Chinese students' intercultural contact and their sociocultural adjustment.

Previous research has demonstrated that a broader social network, especially with host nationals, is very likely to facilitate international students' academic achievement and psychological wellbeing; moreover, this positive association is reciprocal (Taylor and Ali, 2017). For example, Bochner et al.'s (Bochner, McLeod and Lin, 1977, cited in Zhou et al., 2008, p.70) functional model of friendship networks remains substantially influential in contemporary research on international students' intercultural contact. Bochner et al. propose that international students engage in three distinct social networks, each performing a particular psychological function. Interaction with compatriots is the foremost network, allowing international students to maintain their original cultural values and behaviours. Meanwhile, they have contact with host nationals and receive support from this network for the acquisition of the host culture, culture-appropriate skills and academic success. Last but not least, they might interact with sojourners not from China mutually to support each other's intercultural adjustment. Young (2016) recently carried out a study to investigate the employability (in China) of Chinese students who graduated from UK HE. It was found that Chinese graduates highly recommended current and prospective Chinese international students to break out of the Chinese-only social network, in which case they would build up a wider social circle, gain more enriching intercultural experiences, and develop the characteristics that Chinese employers appreciate.

One of the most frequent findings from previous related studies is the benefits of intercultural contact for sociocultural adjustment of sojourners to the new culture. Zheng (2017) recently defined intercultural contact as 'the phenomenon of individuals' interactions with people who are seen as "outgroup members", because of the uncertainty and/or differences associated with languages, values, behaviors, etc. experienced during such interactions' (p.11). He argues that social groups and intercultural contact are ongoing and changing, rather than stationary. There is a wide range of demonstrated advantages of increasing contact with hosts, including assisting in the acquisition of social skills in the new culture (e.g., Searle and Ward, 1990), decreasing stereotypes between different groups (e.g., Church, 1982; Stephen and Stephen, 1985), buffering psychological disturbance stemming from the transition into an alien culture (e.g., Furnham and Bochner, 1982; Zhou et al., 2008), improving intercultural communication competence (Lewthwaite, 1996) and facilitating sociocultural adjustment (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Li and Gasser, 2005; Ward and Kennedy, 1992).

Despite the benefits of contact between international students and host nationals, there is a good deal of research displaying that the amount of this type of intercultural contact is very limited in reality (e.g., Lewthwaite, 1996; Searle and Ward, 1990; Zhou et al., 2008). In general, international students tend to report that their primary social circle is with their compatriots; hence, there is a wide gap between the desired and actual amount of contact with people from the host country. Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) observed similar phenomenon and explain that, if not spending enough time with compatriots, Asian students possibly worry about losing their group membership.

This research adds evidence to the case of Chinese international students' intercultural contact in the United Kingdom. The two groups of interviewees suggested that Chinese students at the investigated university actually had very restricted interaction with people not from China. For example, Student-participants 1 and 3 said that they actually reduced intercultural contact to avoid using English or deal with cultural distance. Both cases show that they 'drew back' from intercultural contact, yet without 'leaping forward' later (Kim, 2005, p.384). It suggests that, when encountering communication difficulties (i.e., language barrier or cultural distance), they would rather seek a sense of security and relief with their Chinese friends and try to avoid interaction with people from other countries. They are very likely to take no future action to change the status quo. The sample in Zheng's study (2017) engaged 13 one-year taught Master's Chinese students studying in UK HE, very like the student sample in this study. Echoing above findings and examples, Zheng concludes that participants were not always able to cope with communicative difficulties in the new culture in a positive and productive way that enhanced their psychological wellbeing or social adjustment.

When it comes to the views of academic interviewees, the disproportionately large Chinese student population at the university was a great concern for Staff-participants 1 and 4. They believed that being surrounded by so many compatriots in an academic setting antagonised the call on Chinese students to interact more with non-Chinese people. A similar phenomenon was observed by Lewthwaite (1996) in the New Zealand context. It was found that in lectures, tutorials or other academic settings there was very little interaction between New Zealand students and international students.

Based on a recent investigation of Chinese students' social adjustment to a UK university, Spencer-Oatey et al. (2016) detected statistically significantly less satisfaction among Chinese students than other students in terms of having intercultural contact. They also found that Chinese students encountered the highest degree of difficulty of all other students in their interactions with people from various cultural backgrounds. There was also some qualitative evidence in the study that the vast number of Chinese students in that UK university might be one explanation, because it provided Chinese students with great opportunities to speak Chinese and lured them into sticking together.

These findings led to two further questions: why did student-participants in the current research still huddle close together, even though they were well aware of the benefits of intercultural contact for intercultural adjustment? and why was it so difficult for them to build up an effective network with non-compatriots? There are four possible answers based on the qualitative results of this research. They are: limited opportunities for intercultural contact, cultural distance, language barrier and insufficient knowledge about British culture.

The first possible reason was inspired by the views of the two academic interviewees (Staff-participants 1 and 4), as discussed above. They emphasized providing more opportunities for Chinese international students to interact with people from different cultures within an academic setting. This emphasis has support not only from previous research, but is to a large extent apparent in the recommendations (Research Question 9) of student interviewees to the involved university. In order to promote Chinese students' intercultural adjustment, student-participants looked very much forward to more communication or teamwork with non-Chinese during the process of completing the assigned coursework. Therefore, they wanted to join a more nationality-diverse coursework team. However, comments, such as 'Because there are too many Chinese, there should be one non-Chinese in the group' (Student-participant 4) and 'There may be no foreigners in a group for doing coursework' (Student-participant 3) imply that there was an overwhelming number of Chinese students in the lectures that they attended. In this case, it is not difficult to understand why intercultural contact is limited in the academic environment. Furthermore, these descriptions yield more qualitative insights into how the identified quantitative relationship between service quality of the academic factor and participants' sociocultural adjustment could be explained.

Zhang and Brunton (2007) state that 52 per cent of their Chinese participants felt dissatisfied with the opportunities available to engage with local communities or leisure activities that were believed to be helpful ways to build good relationships with host nationals. The majority of Chinese students (55%) were not happy about the opportunities available to make host-national friends in a leisure setting.

The comment 'Communications among people from the same country are easier' by Student-participant 3 is not unusual in earlier studies. Tompson and Tompson's (1996) research supports the current study, because its interview participants were international students at a business school and, in this research, four of the five student interviewees were also from the business school of the involved university. The two researchers found that students perceived the development of social network with host nationals as the most important yet most difficult aspect of their adjustment. Likewise, the Chinese participants in the study by Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) scored their sociocultural adjustment to the United Kingdom as the nine hardest items. Nearly all nine related to opportunities for intercultural contact, either with the British or with people from other countries. Similar findings were also reported by other studies where Chinese international students in different host countries were engaged. Examples include Andrade (2006) in the context of English-speaking countries, Newsome and Cooper (2016) in the context of the United Kingdom, and Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) in the context of the United States. This study does not intend to suggest that the student and teacher interviewees confine intercultural contact to academic settings. By contrast, the authors argue for the importance of interacting with non-Chinese in a wider context. For instance, Staff-participant 3 pointed out that many Chinese students stuck together and did not mix socially with other nationalities. Likewise, Staff-participant 2 associated Chinese students' lack of self-confidence in language competency with the phenomenon that 'they tend to stick together, talk to their friends, (and) not go out'. In the case of student interviewees, many of them (e.g., Student-participants 3 and 4) gave examples of cultural differences by referring to British food or the British way of making jokes. These examples suggest that they were not merely thinking about their academic experiences when discussing what hindered regular interaction outside the Chinese community.

It is noteworthy that keeping to the Chinese community is not without merit. Although existing evidence showing its adverse role in sociocultural adjustment is prominent, its benefits for international students' emotional state should not be ignored (Wang, 2016). By means of making friends with compatriots, international students may relieve to a certain extent the stress resulting from learning and living in an alien environment (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2016; Zhou and Todman, 2009). This is actually not very hidden in the perspectives of student interviewees. For instance, Student-participant 2's comments, 'I am not very competent in English even till now. So I am afraid of using English to communicate with people from other countries', indicate that intercultural contact for her was psychologically stressful, because she did not believe herself to have sufficient English competency. On the other hand, hanging out with Chinese people made it possible to avoid using English for communication and therefore reduced her emotional stress. Similar situations apply to all the students who attended the interviews. To support the benefits of Chinese student communities, Ross and Chen (2015) assert as follows:

> If there are enough Chinese students to form a circle of friends, students have less incentive to try to break into an American peer group that is continually created… in contrast, information networks, Chinese social media and student organisations provide the Chinese student community with space for social capital formation and protect Chinese undergraduate students from campus stereotypes. (p.21)

If linking back to the quantitative findings, the identified higher level of student-perceived psychological adjustment seems to be more reasonably explained. The large Chinese student population at the investigated university was blamed by both groups of interviewees for being counterproductive to the sociocultural adjustment of Chinese students, because they believed it allowed fewer opportunities than expected for intercultural contact in an academic setting. However, this large Chinese student population was also likely to promote the psychological adjustment of student-participants, offering them easy access to the Chinese student community as their primary contact network. It means that, in neither the academic nor the non-academic setting, were the student-participants of this research obliged to face difficulties stemming from initiating or maintaining contact with non-Chinese students. They could conveniently receive psychological protection from the circle of their compatriots (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2016).

As a reminder, in the light of student interviewees' answers to Research Question 8, the other three reasons proposed for Chinese students' poor intercultural contact are cultural distance, the language barrier and insufficient knowledge of British culture.

Reinforcing the argument in section 5.1, their status as international students, again, appears to be the overarching factor in the reasons mentioned above. Challenges associated with cultural differences, a lack of language competency and unfamiliarity with the host culture are experienced exclusively by international students, especially during their social adjustment process (Andrade, 2006). Likewise, Newsome and Cooper (2016) declare that international students' role as temporary 'foreigners' tends to contribute to their limited interactions with host nationals as a way to minimise the potential stress produced by cultural or value conflict.

As for the theme of *cultural distance*, student interviewees expressed that the differences between people from other countries and themselves hindered regular intercultural contact. The differences could manifest in a wide range of aspects, such as the food preferences mentioned by Student-participant 1 and ways of socialising mentioned by Student-participant 4. It was more comfortable for them to hang out with compatriots as a means of dodging these differences, even though they believed in the benefits of intercultural contact for their intercultural experiences and adjustment. Once again, this theme helps to explain further why the degree of self-reported sociocultural adjustment achieved by student-participants was statistically significantly less than their self-reported psychological adjustment.

There are ample previous studies demonstrating the challenges arising from cultural distance. As the pioneers of distinguishing the two sub-dimensions of intercultural adjustment, Ward and Searle (1991) found that cultural distance is one of the powerful influencers of international students' sociocultural adjustment. Gu (2009) and Gu et al. (2010) propose that *intercultural* experience is different from *cross-cultural* experiences. The latter 'inherently stresses boundary cross, differences and diversity' (p.4), while the former contains both domestic and international contexts, and suggests interactions between different cultures. Under these circumstances, encountering the differences between the home and host cultures seems to inevitable if achieving *intercultural* adjustment is the target. Gu et al. further explain that managing such differences augments the stress that international students have to cope with during their intercultural experience.

The study of Wang (2016) provides cultural insights into student interviewees' responses to cultural distance. Wang examined the impact of Chinese cultural values on three Chinese students' experiences in US HE through a combination of interviews, participant observations and document analysis. He argues that it was natural and reasonable for the three students to shrink from intercultural contact when confronted with cultural distance. They initially had a desire to integrate with host national communities. Nevertheless, none succeeded. Chinese culture highlights 'communal interest, social acceptance, and the self's reputation' and 'interpersonal connectedness' (p.623), whereas the new American sociocultural environment values more the individual. Cultural conflict as such led to a sense of isolation, so that these three participants chose to stick with their compatriots.

Regarding Wang's argument, however, it would be hasty to treat Chinese culture as the determining factor in student interviewees' recoil from culture distance or from intercultural contact. This is not to deny the existence of the impact of Chinese culture, but urges one to be more cautious that student-participants in this research are not only Chinese but also *individuals* with agency. At both the quantitative and qualitative stages, they did not report undue psychological stress, which provides little support for Oberg's (1960) anticipation of cultural shock. This suggests that they actively coped with the challenges during their intercultural experiences through various strategies. To make the influences of cultural distance abate, minimising intercultural contact seems to be the commonest strategy employed by all student interviewees, and perhaps by numerous other Chinese students, according to academic interviewees' observations. But there is a strong possibility that it is also common among non-Chinese international students having to face cultural conflict as well as living and studying in the United Kingdom, or even among local students. It could be argued that exaggerating cultural influences itself encourages the cultural stereotyping that many researchers have warned against (e.g., Biggs, 1996; Gu, 2009; Straker, 2016).

Being critical of Wang's argument leads to another proposed reason for student interviewees' limited intercultural contact and lower level of sociocultural adjustment that they perceived to have achieved: insufficient knowledge about British culture.

From the perspective of three student interviewees, the necessity for a familiarity with the British culture (the theme – *cultural knowledge*) is pertinent to making friends with the British. Student-participant 4 thought learning British culture from the internet was a good means, and Student-participant 5 stressed the importance of knowing 'more about what they like'. However, Student-participant 1 explicitly admitted that she made friends only with Chinese, due to a lack of knowledge about the host culture. Her accounts especially embody the opinion of Newsome and Cooper (2016),whereby an unfamiliarity with the host culture easily fosters a fear of rejection by people in that culture.

The above comments from those student interviewees support the statement made by Lewthwaite (1996): if interpreting intercultural adjustment as a learning process, two different learnings should be emphasized within this process. One is intercultural communication, which echoes the significance of having intercultural contact. The other is learning and applying culture-appropriate behaviours in the host country, which suggests an acquisition of knowledge about that culture at first. An improvement in knowledge, skills and cultural awareness during the intercultural learning process is to international students' benefit in terms of facilitating them to function effectively within both their home and the host countries (Gu et al., 2010; Gudykunst, 1998).

Although agreeing with the importance of Chinese students' possession of cultural knowledge to their intercultural adjustment, the academic interviewees of this research laid more stress on a special aspect of the British culture – the academic culture. They considered Chinese students' academic adjustment to the UK HE environment indispensable to their general intercultural adjustment. Unfortunately, they found that many Chinese students were not well aware of the difference between Chinese and British academic cultures. The learning styles that students had acquired or become used to in China are dramatically different from what is expected from them in the United Kingdom. Staff-participant 6 pointed out that Chinese students tended to view the lecturers as the authority of the class, who should not be questioned. By contrast, in UK HE, critical thinking skills are highly valued. Another example is the case of Staff-participant 2, who was not happy about the phenomenon that many of her postgraduate Chinese students had not become independent learners but expected detailed and structured guidance for their learning.

The challenges associated with attaining academic adjustment are reported by various studies. Zhou and Todman (2009) assert that most of the significant challenges for international students stem from unfamiliarity with the academic environment of the host culture, given that the primary goal of their sojourn is successful accomplishment of degree requirements. Struggling to achieve academic adjustment or success leaves international students with less time for intercultural socialisation, because they have to work harder to realise that primary goal (Andrade, 2006; Lewthwaite, 1996). Yeh and Inose (2003) discovered that insufficient knowledge about social and academic differences between Chinese and American cultures gave rise to substantial stress for Chinese international students studying in the United States.

Similar to that of the current research, the sample in the study of Robertson et al. (2000) comprised teachers and international students. The teachers deemed that international students were short of critical skills, were not competent in understanding oral English and had to improve their academic writing, whereas student-participants of that study were not satisfied with teachers' speaking speed and use of colloquial English. Likewise, two student interviewees of this research were also critical of some international lecturers' accent and their teaching styles (section 4.2.2.1). Given students' perspectives reported by both studies, it could be argued that some challenges during international students' academic adaptation arise from the academic staff. The academic staff of the host universities are perhaps not sufficiently conscious that there are big gaps between their views and international students' views, and that it is not only international students' responsibility to manage the challenges of their academic adjustment.

In these circumstances, the emerged theme *cultural knowledge* is worthy of additional attention for two reasons. First, it supports the important quantitative findings that there could be huge and many differences between the perceptions of the student and the teacher. Even when both groups of interviewees of this research were trying to explain the important role of the same aspect in Chinese students' intercultural adjustment, their opinions tend to be non-identical. Unfamiliarity with the academic environment of the United Kingdom was not raised by the student interviewees. One possible reason is that, at the time when the interviews were conducted, they had not reflected on their habitual learning styles or compared their learning styles to the requirements of the new academic environment. Or they might not feel ready to speak out about the academic challenges that they had encountered. Another possible reason might be that they did not treat the differences between the two HE environments as challenges to their intercultural experience.

Whatever the reasons, though, this theme has a strong implication that two-way, more regular and transparent communication is necessary between Chinese students and academic staff in the United Kingdom. Chinese students would be more able to understand the difference between British and Chinese HE, know more clearly about what is expected from them for academic success, manage their own expectations of academic life in the United Kingdom and, ultimately, enhance their intercultural experience. Meanwhile, academics would obtain more and clearer understandings of Chinese students' various starting places, such as their academic expectations and primary academic concerns. Academics, thus, would be in a better position to facilitate Chinese students' transition to and learning in the UK academic environment, as well as to manage their own expectations or assumptions about Chinese students.

The differences between student- and teacher-interviewees' qualitative accounts for *cultural knowledge* reinforce the call for frequent (ideally, as early as possible) and mutual expectations communications between the two groups, thus strengthening the argument made in section 5.2.2. They also support the theme (in section 4.2.2.2) emerging from academic interviewees' opinions on service quality of HE provisions by the investigated university: at present, the quantity and quality of expectation communications as such were limited to hindering deeper and mutual understanding between Chinese students and the academics and, in many cases, negatively impacting on the two parties' learning/teaching experiences.

Second, the theme of *cultural knowledge* inspires us to ponder again Wang's (2016) argument about the influences of Chinese culture. The observations of teacher interviewees might reveal some common characteristics of many Chinese learners: lacking critical thinking skills, autonomy and the initiative to communicate with their teachers. But a key issue is whether these observed characteristics are due solely to the influence of Chinese culture. This research argues that we could not and should not deny the effects that Chinese culture can have on Chinese students' learning preferences/styles. But teachers are advised to be mindful not to turn their observations into any cultural stereotypes, as cautioned by many researchers (e.g., Andrade, 2006; De Vita, 2007; Gu, 2009). Adjusting their learning preferences/styles to the requirements of the UK academic environment is not a quick or easy task for Chinese students. It could be more difficult without regular and mutual expectation communications, which could offer an open ground for both Chinese students and academics of UK universities to learn what is expected from each side, and more importantly to reflect upon their assumptions about the other side. As Straker (2016) advocates, such mutual understanding requires 'an awareness of one's own' in the first place (p.309). Perhaps the account of Staff-participant 4 is best presented here as a reminder:

> I think the key thing to make a good service is making sure that you know where the starting point is for the student, and the student or the potential student know where the starting

point is for teacher. And you sort of meet the same point, and I think that's the basis of a good teaching relationship. And that's probably one of the essential elements.

The last proposed reason for the limited intercultural contact of student-participants is the language barrier, which has been argued to be almost exclusive to their current status as international students. Although language competence is the last to be discussed here, it was treated as paramount by all student interviewees for their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom. Actually, its importance has already manifested in student interviewees' expectations of being provided with a supportive *learning atmosphere* (in section 4.2.2.1) as one influence of service quality of HE provided by the investigated university. When it comes to adjustment to the United Kingdom, student interviewees also believed that being competent in English is essential to intercultural contact. In turn, more interaction with people from different cultures enhances their English competency. For instance, Student-participant 3 suggested that more intercultural contact was helpful to improve both spoken English and vocabulary.

Abundant research provided support for students' perspectives as above, demonstrating that the most serious challenge that international students have to confront in the host country is connected with limited language competence. Its influence extends to both their academic and social adjustment to the new environment (Geary, 2016). For example, Tompson and Tompson (1996) note that language was the second most difficult aspect for international students of the business school, second only to building up a social network in the host country. The two researchers also suggest that the language barrier might explain international students' preference for their compatriots. One of their student-participants expressed that in a lecture he deliberately chose to sit beside an individual with the same native language so he could quickly ask that individual questions for academic purposes and easily understand the answer. Zhang and Brunton (2007) found that the majority (56%) of Chinese participants believed that the language difficulty represented the greatest impediment to their academic efforts. As for the current research, the feelings of student interviewees and the observations of academic interviewees appear to add evidence that the language barrier could exert a strong impact on intercultural contact in both academic and social settings.

Regardless of many years spent learning English and the achievement of IELTS scores required by the investigated university, two student interviewees (Student-participants 1 and 2) still revealed low self-confidence regarding their ability to use English for intercultural communications. The great frustration is that they reduced their intercultural contact on purpose, instead of seeking more intercultural communications opportunities to improve their self-confidence and competence of using English. This finding is in line with the observations of Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) that poor English language competence is likely to lead to lower self-esteem. By contrast, being more confident in English, verbal English in particular, increases international students' social interactions in the new environment and therefore enhances their language competence (Church, 1982; Li and Gasser, 2005; Toyokawa and Toyokawa, 2002). Similarly, Senyshyn et al. (2000) note that only 36 per cent of the respondents were confident with their English skills (reading and writing), despite the fact that all participants had achieved the required entry TOFEL scores. Lewthwaite (1996) points out that the feelings of international students about their English competence may not correspond to their actual ability. They usually feel a lack of confidence in this respect, thus are apt to engage less with lectures or seminars even though they have a strong motivation to contribute.

5.5 The changing pattern of service quality and of intercultural adjustment

What was also investigated in the quantitative phase of this research is how respondents' perceptions regarding service quality and intercultural adjustment have changed, with them accumulating participating experiences in UK HE with time. In light of Lysgaard (1955), it has been hypothesized that changes in these perceptions display a U-curve shape (Hypothesis 4, 5 and 6). The quantitative results show that neither student-participants' nor academic-participants' perceptions could be represented by a U shape, taking into account the length of their learning/teaching experiences in UK HE. Therefore, Hypotheses 4, 5 and 6 cannot be supported by the collected quantitative data.

The rejection of the three hypotheses could be explained from the lens of three aspects: the influences of other individual factors as qualitative results have suggested; the usage of a U curve as a reference shape; and the cross-sectional nature of the methodological design.

In terms of the first aspect, the qualitative results of this research indicate that participants' perceptions of service quality are subject to a few individual factors, apart from the length of their learning/teaching experiences in UK HE. The same situation also applies to their self-evaluation of intercultural adjustment to the UK. The themes that emerged imply that an examination of how participants' perceptions change over time should not ignore any confounding influences from other types of factors.

Student interviewees revealed that some aspects related to their current university, such as the quality of teachers or the learning or physical environment that it offers, are important to their service quality evaluation. These aspects are likely to be situational, depending on 'the actual conditions to which the individual is exposed in the new culture' (Church, 1982, p.549). More importantly, they do not necessarily change over time or in the short term. For instance, the quality of teachers, the most influencing aspect perceived by student interviewees, could not change in a positive way if various stakeholders of HE do not work closely together. Based on the qualitative results, improving teacher quality at least requires input from: the involved university, whose promotion policy is a key source of teachers' motivation to enhance their teaching quality; the leadership team of the university, whose decision about the direction of future development is influential to teachers; the teacher themselves, whose teaching ability, motivation to concentrate on teaching, academic competence, accent and commitment to expectation communications are outstanding aspects from the perspectives of student and academic interviewees; and international students, regarding their expectations of UK HE, efforts to manage own expectations, awareness of differences between Chinese and British HE requirement and levels of active engagement with communications with academics.

When it comes to the intercultural adjustment of Chinese students to the United Kingdom, the unidentified U-pattern from student-participants' self-evaluations might be due to the influence of background variables (e.g., their status as international students) and individual variables (e.g., their English competency). Having intercultural contact, with British people in particular, was perceived to be important for intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom. According to Church (1982), 'the number, variety, and depth of social encounters with host nationals may be the most important yet complex variables' (p.551). The qualitative results have shown that several aspects can impact considerably on student interviewees' intercultural contract. However, it has been argued that those influential aspects are closely related to student interviewees' status as international students. For example, some student interviewees reported that the differences between Chinese and British culture discouraged them from becoming involved in intercultural contact. They did not reveal in interview that their concern about cultural distance diminished or vanished after a period of time of learning in the UK.

The second possible reason for the rejection of Hypothesis 4, 5 and 6 is the usage of a U curve as a reference shape. As stated in section 1.5, one original contribution of this research is to treat individuals' perceptions of service quality as something non-stationary. However, to the best of my knowledge, it is also the first to date to investigate the changing shape of students' and academics' service quality perceptions regarding HE provisions at their university, and also the first to contrast tentatively any existing shape with a U-curve pattern. In this case, there is a possibility that the U-curve theory is not the best applicable theoretical reference, given that it was initially proposed by Lysgaard (1955) for the examination of intercultural adjustment of sojourners. In other words, it might not be appropriate in the investigation of service quality perceptions.

Regarding the examination of intercultural adjustment, the use of U-curve theory as a reference might also need more consideration. Previous research has provided only mixed evidence for its existence in international students' adjustment. For example, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) extended the U- to a W-shape after their study of the re-entry phenomenon. Selby and Woods (1966) found that the academic and social morale of the 68 non-European international students hinged more on the stage of the academic year than presented a U shape over time. Church (1982) comments that 'support for the U-curve hypothesis must be considered weak, inconclusive and overgeneralised' (p.542). Similarly, Ward et al. (1998) summarise the following:

> For all intents and purposes, U-curve theory is still on trial in the intercultural court, the defence pointing to its continued popularity and its heuristic application in understanding cross-cultural transition and adaptation and the prosecution citing its limited wide application. (p.279)

Apart from the influence of situational or personal background factors and potential issues associated with the usage of the U-curve shape as a reference, a third possible reason is the cross-sectional nature of the methodological design of this research. This is a key methodological issue for the investigation into participants' perceptions about both service quality and intercultural adjustment.

So far, the prevailing approach adopted by existing relevant studies (on service quality in particular) is non-longitudinal in nature, which rather diminishes the efforts to track how HE participators' perceptions change over time (O'Neill, 2003). Unfortunately, the current study did not break through in this matter, although it has argued (in section 1.5) that perceived service quality and intercultural adjustment should not be considered stationary in terms of individuals' learning, living or working experience actually taking place and being accumulated continuously.

Thus, this research could be regarded as a new piece of work supporting Oldfield and Baron's (2000) appeal to apply longitudinal designs to studies with a similar focus, in future. As an example of an exploratory longitudinal study where expectations and service quality perceptions of a sample of undergraduate students were tracked, the work of Hill (1995) suggests that it is necessary to examine students' expectations before and in the process of their educational experiences, because their ever-changing expectations could be better understood and thus managed in this way. Likewise, O'Neill (2003) measures students' service quality perceptions of the orientation process at two different times: immediately after the orientation and one month after. The longitudinal design enabled the researcher to trace how students' perceptions had changed or developed over time: the service quality of 21 of the 22 SERVQUAL items was significantly reduced in a month.

6. Conclusions

This final chapter seeks to draw together all the elements of this thesis. It will provide a brief overview before summarising the main findings from the survey and interview data about students' and academic staff's perceptions of service quality of UK HE and of Chinese students' intercultural adjustment to the UK. It will then include the current researcher's self-critique of the limitations and issues arising from aspects of the research process and research design. Thereafter, the contributions of this study will be discussed, followed by the significant implications for policy and practice. Finally, this chapter will make a number of recommendations for future research.

6.1 Overview of this thesis

This study set out to investigate the concepts of service quality and intercultural adjustment from the perspectives of intenational students and academic staff. Given the large number of Chinese students studying in UK HE, it is of great value to obtain a good understanding of their academic expectations and their overseas learning and intercultural experiences. It is equally important for Chinese students to become well informed about academics' expectations of them, so that they can maximise their academic success and international experience.

However, existing studies on similar topics have mainly focused on the perspective of a single HE stakeholder. The investigation of students' perceptions and student satisfaction dominates previous research examining the service quality of the HE provided by host universities. A considerable body of previous research also endeavours to provide host universities or academics with recommendations whereby they could facilitate their international students' intercultural adjustment. Only few studies have raised the issue of various HE stakeholders' shared understanding; that is, whether other HE stakeholders and students share a common understanding of the constitution of HE service quality, and whether international students agree with the appropriateness or effectiveness of those recommendations that were proposed by other stakeholders (e.g., academics, counsellors or international offices) with the aim of improving their intercultural experiences.

This study paid specific attention to the understanding shared by students and their teachers, as it argues that they are the two key parties making the most significant contributions to the quality of the teaching and learning process and outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hill et al., 2003; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2003). It investigated and compared the two groups' perceptions of HE service quality and intercultural adjustment, dedicated to locating and learning the differences and consistency in these perceptions.

The dynamic nature of individuals' perceptions of service quality and intercultural adjustment has only received limited attention from previous researchers, who have tended to assume that these perceptions are stationary over time and separate from each other. This study also sought to capture the dynamics of student- and staff-participants' perceptions in different ways. First, it took into account the dynamic interaction between Chinese students' general intercultural experiences in the UK and their academic experiences in the environment of UK HE. Given that the successful accomplishment of the degree requirements of the host university is the primary goal of most international students who choose to pursue HE abroad (Andrade, 2006; Lewthwaite, 1996; Zhou and Todman, 2009), the quality of their learning experience should play a significant role in their overseas experience, and vice versa. Second, this study examined the effect on students' and academics' perceptions of service quality and intercultural adjustment of the length of their learning/teaching experience in UK HE. The argument is that these perceptions could be dynamic and change with time passing. Third, individual interviews were conducted with the student- and staff-participants of this study in order to understand the nuances in their expectations and expereriences.

Given the requirement of best answering the research questions (see section 1.4.2), this study adopted a mixed-method convergent parallel design containing approximately concurrent conductions of a quantitative and qualitative strand. Research Questions 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 guided the quantitative strand, where a cross-sectional survey was implemented to ascertain some generalised features (Fowler, 2009; Groves et al., 2004) about the service quality evaluations of Chinese students and academic staff from the same UK university, and about their views of Chinese students' intercultural adjustment to the UK. Independent of the quantitative strand, qualitative individual interviews were conducted with a small group of Chinese students and academics further and concretely to understand their individual insights into what constitutes quality HE, how to improve the service quality of HE offered by their university, what influences Chinese students' intercultural adjustment and how to facilitate Chinese students' intercultural adjustment.

6.2 Summary of main findings

This study set out to answer nine research questions. The aim of this section is to present the synthesised main findings of each research question.

1. From the perspective of international students and academic staff at UK universities, what is the service quality of the HE provided by the current university?

The student-participants perceived that their actual education experiences at the host university were not as good as their expectations of UK HE. In line with the findings of Angell et al. (2008), this gap implies a less than expected service quality of HE from that university. By contrast, the staff-respondents of this research perceived that there is no statistically significant gap between their expectations of UK HE and their actual HE experiences at the current university. In other words, academic respondents' HE experiences at their current university were evaluated to be as good as they had expected.

Regarding the importance of the four HE factors, both the student- and staff-participants deemed that the *academic* factor played a more important role in determining HE service quality than the *leisure, industry-link* and *cost* factors. Many previous studies (e.g., Athiyaman, 1997; Cuthbert, 1996; Griemel-Fuhrmann and Geyer, 2003; Hampton, 1993) also found that international students value most the academic aspects of their overseas experiences, although they failed to show whether academic staff have similar views. Despite the two groups of participants attaching the highest level of importance to the academic factor, their university's performance of this factor was appraised as less than expected.

2. Are teachers' and international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university significantly different from one another?

It was found that the student- and staff-participants have dissimilar perceptions of the service quality of the HE offering by the same university. The differences were supported by both quantitative and qualitative data.

To be specific, there is quantitative evidence that the differences between student- and staff-participants' service quality perceptions are statistically significant. The IPA results also supported the differences: the location of each HE factor in the grid is not identical, when the two groups of participants' perceptions are compared. In addition, interview data about what constitutes quality UK HE (Research Question 4) offer qualitative evidence for the differences, as there is only one theme in common: *teacher quality*. Both groups of interviewees deemed the quality of teachers to be the aspect making the most significant contribution to HE service quality. Nevertheless, their interpretations about what teacher quality consists of vary. Participants' high expectations of teacher quality are informative in terms of providing detailed insights into why they attached the highest level of importance to the academic factor.

3. What is the change pattern (if any) in international students' and teachers' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by the current university after accumulating experience of participation in UK HE over time?

7. What is the change pattern (if any) in international students' perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom, with accumulating experience of participation in UK HE over time?

The hypothesised U-curve pattern was not identified in the change in the student participants' perceptions of intercultural adjustment influenced by the length of their learning experiences in UK HE. Neither the student participants' service quality perceptions nor the staff participants' displayed statistically a curvilinear pattern over time. These findings thus challenge the applicability of the U-curve theory (Lysgaard, 1995) to the particular HE context of this study and embody the comments of Church (1982), that 'support for the U-curve hypothesis must be considered weak, inconclusive and overgeneralized' (p.542).

4. From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how can a high quality of HE service be provided by universities in the United Kingdom?

Both groups of interviewees emphasised the importance of *teacher quality* to their expected level of service quality of HE. However, their respective interpretations of the composition of teacher quality are disparate. In light of student interviewees' opinions, four more themes emerged: *fellow student quality*; *learning atmosphere*; *tangibles*; and *career support*. On the other hand, teacher interviewees believed that having *expectation communication between the teacher and student* is vital for quality HE.

The common theme emerging is enlightening for two reasons. First, it suggests that a high level of HE service quality is closely tied to the active engagement of teachers and the quality of their teaching, so it reinforces the value of conducting this study, in which academics were also involved. Second, the differences between student and academic interviewees' interpretations of teacher quality strengthen the necessity for teacher–student communications, such as regarding which changes students and teachers expect to see in teaching, how teacher quality could be further improved and what support they expect to receive from each other and other sources. This research thus has significant implications for policy-makers in that students, who are directly involved in and impacted upon by the teaching process, could bring a unique perspective to the appraisal of teaching quality or make a significant contribution to the writing of teaching quality criteria.

5. From the perspectives of its international students and academic staff, how can the service quality of HE be improved at the university?

When it comes to how to promote the service quality of HE offered by their current university, the student interviewees believed that further improvement of *teaching quality* is the key. They also expected the university to consider recruiting fewer Chinese students in future to make the composition of the student population more diverse. It has been recognised that the investigated university did well in *tangibles*, such as the facilities in the main library. From the perspective of academic interviewees, the university is recommended to improve *teachers' motivation for teaching,* promote *expectation communications between the teacher and student,* and work more on the *recruitment* of international students (e.g. adopting higher admission thresholds).

6. Is there any statistically significant relationship between international students' perceptions of service quality of the HE provided by their university and their perceptions of their intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom?

The quantitative results showed that the student- participants' self-evaluations of their intercultural adjustment to the UK are not related to their perception of HE service quality. However, a significant and positive association was identified between the service quality of the academic factors and the student-participants' sociocultural adjustment. In other words, if the service quality of the academic-related aspects at the host university is enhanced, Chinese students will attain a higher level of sociocultural adjustment to the UK. It was also found that the student-participants in this research reported a higher level of psychological adjustment than sociocultural adjustment, and that the differences between these two sub-dimensions of intercultural adjustment are statistically significant.

8. *From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how is intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom affected?*

Three themes were abstracted from the student interviewees' perceptions of this research question: *language competency*; *cultural distance*; and *cultural knowledge*. Based on the perspectives of the academic interviewees, three themes surfaced: *intercultural contact*; *cultural knowledge*; and *length of stay.*

The views of student and academic interviewees regarding what influences Chinese students' intercultural adjustment to the UK show a high degree of complementarity to the quantitative findings for two reasons. The first is that the themes that emerged from these views help to pinpoint what accounts for the positive relationship between service quality of academic aspects offered by the involved university and students' sociocultural adjustment to the UK. According to the literature, all these themes are closely related to sojourners' sociocultural adjustment to the host culture (e.g., Gu, 2009; Gu et al., 2010; Searle and Ward, 1990; Straker, 2016; Taylor and Ali, 2017; Wang, 2016; Zhou et al., 2008). The two groups of interviewees of this study discussed the importance of these themes mainly in the context of an academic setting.

In addition, these themes jointly provide deeper insights into another key quantitative finding: student-participants' self-evaluated level of sociocultural adjustment is statistically and significantly less than that of their psychological adjustment. Most student and academic interviewees' accounts suggested that a lack of intercultural contact is the overarching reason for the relatively low level of sociocultural adjustment of Chinese students. It was indicated that psychological stress (e.g., don't feel confident about language competence or worry about cultural differences), in many cases, discourages Chinese students from actively looking for or seizing opportunities for intercultural contact. The two groups of interviewees also observed that Chinese students tend to spend more time with their compatriots to reduce such psychological stress. These findings provide both quantitative and qualitative evidence for the argument of Searle and Ward (1990) that psychological and sociocultural adjustment should be regarded as two closely related yet distinctive dimensions of intercultural adjustment.

9. From the perspectives of international students and academic staff, how can intercultural adjustment to the United Kingdom be facilitated by universities in the United Kingdom?

In terms of how the investigated university could facilitate Chinese students' intercultural adjustment in future, two themes emerged from the student interviewees' perceptions: *intercultural contact* and *teacher–student communication*. The academic interviewees discussed the *recruitment* of Chinese students and *intercultural contact*.

As discussed in section 5.4.3, plenty of previous studies have demonstrated that intercultural contact has a great influence on international students' sociocultural adjustment. In a complex way, it can even affect the quality of their academic experience in the host country (e.g., Taylor and Ali, 2017). However, both groups of interviewees in this study suggested that having intercultural interaction is one of the most salient challenges that Chinese international students face. Thus, they made a common recommendation to their university: to facilitate Chinese students' intercultural adjustment by promoting their intercultural contact with people from different cultures.

6.3 A critique of the present study

This study has offered a valuable perspective on how different Chinese students' and academics' perceptions may be, even though they are from the same university and meet regularly with each other. As the researcher, I am aware that there are several limitations to the research design and implementation of this study. Thus, care needs to be taken in drawing inferences and making recommendations for policy and practice.

Many of the studies on service quality and intercultural adjustment that are included in Chapter 2 are dated. Accepting this limitation, I believe it is vital to review these studies as they provide readers with the most fundamental and influential theories regarding the two concepts of interest. They also display how the two concepts have developed and been applied in different fields.

I was confronted with many challenges at the sampling phase. In advance of the data collection for the quantitative strand, a staff member at the international office of the involved university offered help to distribute the student-version questionnaire to all registered full-time Chinese students via university emails. After a two-month wait, this plan turned out to be unfeasible for regulation issues. This research did not suffer seriously, because I then adopted a convenience sampling strategy to recruit student-participants. The actual data collection process took place before the university's examination weeks, so I approached Chinese students by going regularly to the main library, which normally attracts a large number of students for preparation at this time. However, the hoped-for support from the international office this research would have given each registered Chinese student an equal chance of being involved and recruited more Chinese students from various disciplines across the university. The usage of convenience sampling strategy brings serious limitations (Lavrakas, 2008; Leiner, 2016; Saumure and Given, 2008) to the findings of this study, with respect to providing data about international students from other countries and even about Chinese students studying in other UK HE institutions, and comparing the sample of this research to the target population.

For the quantitative survey, the recruitment of academic participants was also challenging due to the difficulty in contacting them, and also their busy and diverse schedules. Many accessible academics suggested that there were only a few Chinese students on their courses and believed that they only had limited experience of interacting with or teaching Chinese students, therefore refused to take part in this research. In view of this feedback, I changed my sampling strategy by striving to contacting academics who were teaching the six most popular disciplines among Chinese international students, according to HESA (2017). The rationale was that teachers with many Chinese students on their courses were more likely to participate in this study, as they might feel that they had rich and relevant experience to contribute. I am still comfortable with what I have done, albeit conscious of the limitations and accepting the potential for alternative sampling strategies.

In this research, qualitative interviews were conducted to answer some research questions. However, I realised that the student and academic interviewees involved were exclusively from two particular schools of the investigated university. It was demanding to recruit volunteers to attend the interviews, as the data collection process for the qualitative strand overlapped the Easter holidays and the examination period. Nevertheless, I accept that this is part of the nature of doing research in reality. With hindsight, I could have made more effort to engage Chinese students and academic staff from other schools. Also, I would have thought more about the timing of recruiting volunteers, such as avoiding the periods near holidays and examination weeks.

6.4 Contributions of this study

The current study set out to understand and improve Chinese international students' and academic staff's learning/teaching experiences in UK HE. It also aimed at researching Chinese students' intercultural experiences in the UK. Three key works – service quality, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988), intercultural adjustment by Searle and Ward (1990) and the U-curve theory by Lysgaard (1955) – have provided the theoretical perspective for this research. The original contributions that this study can offer the current state of knowledge are as follows.

First, the employment of the concept of service quality enables the exploration of HE expectations and experiences through the lenses of both students and teachers, whose inputs have a direct bearing on the quality of the teaching and learning process and their outcomes. Although exsiting research found that the service quality model is subject to measurement issues (e.g., Babakus and Boller, 1992; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Dabholkar and Shepherd, 2000; Sultan and Wong, 2010; Teas, 1993), this study did not specially seek to evaluate service quality as a measure per se. So no data has been purposefully collected to allow this study to 'test' the measures of service quality. Through advocating for active engagement of both international students and academics rather than favouring a single perspective, this study, however, makes contributions to addressing the concern of many previous researchers over whether it is appropriate to apply service quality into a HE context where the difficulty of defining 'customors' has been a major controversy (e.g., Lobo and Gurn, 2014; Quinn et al. 2009; Sahney et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2007). Without exclusively treating students as customers and teachers a service delivers, this study supports the importance of having the two sides' co-construction (Clark and Gieve, 2006) for improvement of higher education service quality with quantitative and qualitative findings. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, it is the first study to compare students' perspective of HE service quality with academics' perspective. Having offered strong evidence for differences in students' and academics' perceptions, this study challenges the assumption that teachers and students from the same university automatically have a shared understanding of what constitutes quality HE and how to improve HE quality effectively. Thus, this study is significant in terms of adding a layer of collaboration to our interpretation of service quality in the HE context: it makes us more aware that a comprehensive understanding and efficient improvement of HE service quality should be a collective work, for which a shared understanding of various stakeholders is critical.

Second, this study enhances our knowledge of intercultural adjustment by investigating the perceptions of a particular group of students (Chinese students) and comparing them with the perceptions of the academics teaching at the host UK universities. In order to do so, the two sides' perspective on the following general questions was explored through individual interviews: how is students' intercultural adjustment affected? (related to Research Question 8); and how can it be best facilitated? (related to Research Question 9). The study of Zhou and Todman (2008) demonstrates that the group of UK lecturers interviewed were often insufficiently aware of the problems (or absence of problems) that their Chinese students had encountered in reality, and that the shared understanding of how to solve these problems was limited. This study can contribute to the development of such shared understanding, with respect to what the challenges or facilitators are, why these challenges or facilitators exit, and more importantly what support is much needed and most appropriate for Chinese students' intercultural adjustment.

This study provides ample evidence that academic staff and Chinese students are inclined to think that facilitating intercultural adjustment is the other side's main responsibility. This study is also enlightening, because it reminds both Chinese students and the academics of the host universities that it is important to take a step back to reflect on their assumptions about the other side (Kingston and Forland, 2008). This study is significant in terms of cautioning against the stereotype whereby Chinese international students' challenges in achieving intercultural adjustment are due solely to the influence of Chinese culture. It is also vital for academics at UK universities to gain a better understanding of Chinese culture so that they can become more informed about what Chinese students bring in, their assumptions about Chinese students and how to work more effectively with Chinese students. Thus, this study is in the same spirit as the remark made by Salter-Dvorak (2004) on Chinese students in particular: "we have as much to learn from our Chinese learners as they have to learn from us" (p.38).

Third, this study innovatively combines service quality with intercultural adjustment, which, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has not been done before. However, linking these two concepts has proved to be a productive attempt, given that a positive and statistically significant relationship has been identified between one factor of service quality – the quality of *academic* aspects offered by the host UK universities and a sub-dimension of intercultural adjustment – *sociocultural adjustment* achieved by the student participants of this study. Such a relationship makes a significant contribution to knowledge, because it demonstrates that Chinese students' academic experiences and their adjustment to sociocultural aspects can influence one another greatly, rather than being entirely independent. Thus, this study enhances our understanding of service quality and intercultural adjustment by building a new dynamic connection between the two concepts.

Finally, this study re-examines the U-curve theory in a new setting, where the intercultural experiences of Chinese students studying in UK HE is the focus. It was found that the U-curve is not applicable to this particular context. However, a lesson learned from the study is that the dynamics in Chinese students' and academic staff's perceptions of the two concepts warrants more attention. Rather than staying static, these perceptions are actually changing, and the change pattern over time could be mediated by the influence of various personal (e.g., confidence in language competency, level of knowledge of Chinese/British culture, expectations of teaching quality) and situational factors (e.g., the degree of student diversity with regard to nationality and the size of lecture rooms). Another lesson learned is that Chinese students are not homogeneous, and neither are the academic staff of the host universities. Therefore, the role played by time in changing their perceptions of service quality and intercultural adjustment should be examined with a good awareness of the impact of other individual characteristics.

Moreover, this study introduces methodological innovations to the analysis of service quality. ANOVA was performed to track the changes in participants' perceptions over time, and this has not been exercised in previous research. This analysis method proved to be useful in terms of yielding solid statistical evidence for the fluidity of these perceptions. Going beyond the use of t-tests to determine the size and direction of the E-E gaps, this study conducted ANOVA to examine the variance in participants' expectations of different HE sub-factors. It was found that Chinese students and academic staff have the highest expectations of the quality of the academic factor, while the lowest expectations are of the quality of the leisure factor. Such analysis of HE expectations has shown itself to be constructive, because it provides additional and useful insights to policy-makers, academics and other HE stakeholders as they work toward a higher quality of HE.

6.5 Implications of this study

The findings of this study have profound implications for HE policy-makers, educators, and other HE stakeholders within the involved university. These findings might also have wider implications in other HE contexts, although caution must be exercised, given its limited scope. The rest of this section covers some of this study's implications for policy and practice.

6.5.1 Implications for policy

The results of this study imply that more meaningful student engagement is needed to structure university policy. This is closely allied with the *collegiality* principle of the current 'Simply Better: The University Strategy' (University of Southampton, 2016). The *collegiality* principle gives university staff in various roles collective responsibility for the pursuit of the highest quality (ibid.). The University Executive team could espouse and implement this principle from a more holistic approach: placing stronger recognition of the value of partnership between students and university staff in different roles to work collectively towards the highest quality.

Another key implication is that Chinese students' input could be beneficial to the enhancement of teaching quality, which is part of the education strategy. Paying special attention to teaching is closely allied to the university's commitment to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (University of Southampton, n.d.). Haynes (2017) argues that TEF, apart from lacking valid metrics adequately and genuinely to measure teaching excellence, has another problem: it does not take the situation of international students into account. Thus, Haynes maintains that international students have been 'TEF-ed out' (p.218). The findings of this study imply that the education strategy needs to adopt a more inclusive approach to improving the quality of teaching and the TEF outcome by working closely with Chinese students who, as Trahar and Hyland (2011) argue, can contribute a unique cultural perspective to teaching excellence.

6.5.2 Implications for practice

The greatest practical implication of this study is to promote teacher–student communication to achieve a shared understanding between them. There are several ways in which the findings of this study would support a move towards more meaningful communication between Chinese international students and the academic staff of the host university.

First, the quantitative and qualitative findings of this research have demonstrated that student and academic staff participants, although from the same university, have disparate views of the quality of HE provided by their university and Chinese students' intercultural adjustment. Thus, this study implies that communication between Chinese students and academics needs to be based on a reciprocal channel, in which the active involvement of both sides is at the core. Also, there is a need to highlight that mutual communication is not restricted to the student–staff channel. They could be extended to student–student and teacher–teacher channels, where necessary and feasible. For example, newly arrived Chinese students could benefit from contacting peers who have been in the United Kingdom for longer. Previous students with richer academic and living experience in the United Kingdom could help to manage the service quality perceptions and HE expectations of new students. Through the mutual teacher–teacher channel, academics from different disciplines could share their experiences of teaching Chinese students and gain useful insights from others' relevant experiences.

However, the difference between students' and teachers' perceptions should not impede deeper communications. Further communications are important to pinpoint and explore these differences, as well as to seek a shared understanding of how to address them. In order to do so, both sides are recommended to feel encouraged to reflect on their own HE expectations and openly discuss these with the other side. It is also vital that teachers and students have an open attitude towards managing their expectations wherever necessary, and towards regarding each other as partners working together for a better HE experience.

Second, the findings of this research have demonstrated that student and academic participants' service quality/intercultural adjustment perceptions are dynamic. Under these circumstances, regular communication is needed to update students and academics on the changed perceptions of the other side. It is worth noting that regular communication goes beyond repeated communication. Moreover, it is focused on issues emerging from previous communications.

Third, the qualitative results of this study imply that meaningful communication between students and academic staff requests bespoke support from other HE stakeholders. For instance, some teacher interviewees revealed that they expected to attend training courses on Chinese culture and on the Chinese HE system. If such support were offered by the university, they would be better informed of their Chinese students' starting points and feel readier for forthcoming communication with them. Another example is that some student interviewees expected to receive more language support from their personal tutors to prepare themselves better for intercultural contact.

In addition to making implications for the communication between teachers and students, the findings of this study imply that the marketing office could make an important contribution to managing potential/accepted Chinese students' HE expectations by providing more detailed information on the university website, such as what the degree/programme is about, what the intended outcome of the programme/course is, and how to contact the programme leaders/course lecturers for more details. Before the beginning of the academic year, accurate links to key course resources could be sent to potential/accepted Chinese students so that they would gain a good understanding of their courses at an early stage and manage their expectations of these courses.

Another implication for the marketing office is that it is important to have focused communication with academic staff to request up-to-date programme handbooks. In advance of the start of new academic year, these handbooks need to be available on the university website. Detailed guidance on where and how to find the handbook for their programme could be provided to new Chinese students. It is also important to encourage new Chinese students strongly to read through the handbook to gain a good understanding of their programme/courses at an early stage.

The implication for the admission office is that it is beneficial to organise direct communication (either online or face to face) between new Chinese students and academics on their accepted programme. In this case, the two sides could come to know each other better at an early stage and manage their expectations of one another.

The admission office is also recommended to invite both academics and Chinese students to attend workshops to discuss openly some focused questions on the recruitment of Chinese students. Examples of the questions are: What do academics (or Chinese students) think could have been done better during the process of admitting Chinese students?; and What do academics (or Chinese students) think has been done well during the process of admitting Chinese students?

The findings of this research also have important implications for the Student Union. It was found that the student and academic interviewees believed that facilitating intercultural contact is vital to Chinese students' intercultural adjustment. So, the Student Union is recommended to improve Chinese students' engagement in discussions on what activities they think could best support their intercultural contact with people from other countries, and how they expect these activities to be organised. The Student Union might need to consult Chinese students about how best to promote existing activities in the Chinese community so that Chinese students would be more aware of and then take part in these activities to increase their intercultural interaction with students from other countries. It would also be beneficial to invite academics to these activities so that Chinese students and they would have more opportunities to gain a mutual understanding in a non-academic setting.

6.6 Recommendations for future research

Despite its limited scope, the current study merits further research for a better understanding of HE service quality and international students' intercultural adjustment. Exploring the following areas as the direction of future research would be beneficial.

Future research is recommended to investigate Chinese students' perceptions of UK HE service quality and their intercultural adjustment at different points of time throughout their overseas stay in the UK, and then to trace the change pattern in their perceptions of UK HE over time. Another direction of the new research is to extend the timeline by gathering information on Chinese students' HE expectations before they come to the UK and after they return to China after graduation. With such longitudinal data, future researchers could re-test the U curve or look for other potential shapes displayed by the changes in Chinese students' perceptions over time. A longitudinal design also allows 'systematic assessment'; that is, 'within individuals over time' (Church, 1982, p.561). It suggests that future studies are needed to provide new insights into how each participant, as an individual, changes his/her perceptions of service quality/intercultural adjustment over time.

The participants of this study were from only certain disciplines and at a single Russell Group university. Future research is thus recommended to test its main findings on more Chinese students and academic staff from a wider range of disciplines and other Russell Group universities.

Future research is recommended to extend the scope of this study by engaging other HE stakeholders, such as professional service providers and the Student Union, as well as the staff of the International Student Office. This might invite a different yet insightful perspective on similar topics. Comparing their perceptions with the main findings of this study would be instructive, as it would show to what extent various HE stakeholders have a shared understanding of HE service quality and Chinese students' intercultural adjustment.

Relating to the main findings of this study, further research is needed to explore more fully the influences of some individual factors. Examples include: 1) What is the relationship between Chinese students' self-perceived language competency and their perceptions of intercultural adjustment/service quality of the HE offering of the host university?; 2) Do the differences between Chinese students' and academics' service quality/intercultural adjustment perceptions vary across gender, levels of study (e.g., undergraduate, postgraduate taught or postgraduate research), or academic roles within the university (e.g., lecturer, teaching fellow or professor)?; and 3) How do Chinese students' perceptions of service quality/intercultural adjustment change over time, taking into account their self-reported frequency of having intercultural contact?

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Appendix A: Questionnaire for Students

Your opinon
Matters

Experiences in UK Higher Education

Instructions:

The issue of 'quality' has been widely discussed in higher education, but there is little consensus on its measurement. However, this research will examine the quality of UK higher education from the perspectives of both Chinese international students and the academics. As a result, one of the main purposes of this questionnaire is to ask for your valuable perceptions, from the angle of an international student of Russell Group universities, about the quality of UK higher education.

The second main purpose of this questionnaire is to collect information on your self-ratings of your own adjustment in the UK. For an international student, achieving a certain level of intercultural adjustment tends to be quite important in terms of improving your experiences in the higher education of a foreign country.

This questionnaire consists of *three* parts*. The*y are:

- Part 1 containing three sections. Section 1 and Section 2 includes two scales with similar topics. But the first one is to investigate your opinions about the features of high-quality UK higher education in general. The other one specifically concentrates on your opinions about the quality of higher education provided by the university that you are currently studying at. Section 3 contains two more questions. The first question is a single item relating to your overall satisfaction with the quality of higher education service provided by the university that you are currently studying at. The second item is an open question requesting your ideas about other aspects that you might think are quite important to be provided by high-quality UK higher education.
- Part 2 consisting of different scales to measure your self-evaluation of intercultural adjustment that you think yourself have attained in the UK. The intercultural adjustment is divided into two aspects: psychological and sociocultural adjustment.
- Part 3 that is to gather some personal information from you.

Part 1 –Quality of UK Higher Education

- ## Section 1 – Your opinions about UK higher education

The following set of statements relate to your views on the features of high-quality UK higher education. from the point of view of a student, please show how ***important*** you think each statement is to be provided in UK higher education. Please rate the following statements with Number 1 being not important, and Number 5 being very important. There are no right or wrong answers – all we are interested in is a number that best indicates your ***perception of importance*** of each statement.

Statement	*Not important* ⟷ *Very important*				
1. It is important to have skilled and engaging teachers for courses.	1	2	3	4	5
2. It is important to have nearby pubs, clubs and bars.	1	2	3	4	5
3. It is important to have industry contacts provided by tutors.	1	2	3	4	5
4. It is important to have tuition fees at a reasonable expense.	1	2	3	4	5
5. It is important to have practical skills taught in courses.	1	2	3	4	5
6. It is important to have nearby sports and recreational facilities.	1	2	3	4	5
7. It is important to have a helpful career service.	1	2	3	4	5
8. It is important to have accommodation charged at a reasonable expense.	1	2	3	4	5
9. It is important to have regular access to teaching staff.	1	2	3	4	5
10. It is important to have cafes and social meeting places.	1	2	3	4	5
11. It is important to have a variety of library books and journals.	1	2	3	4	5
12. It is important to have attractive campus layout and appearance.	1	2	3	4	5
13. It is important to have module variety that offers good value.	1	2	3	4	5
14. It is important to have easily transferable skills taught.	1	2	3	4	5
15. It is important to have opportunities for meeting fellow students.	1	2	3	4	5
16. It is important to have reputable degree programme.	1	2	3	4	5
17. It is important to have places on campus to relax during the day.	1	2	3	4	5

18. It is important to have good computing and web facilities.	1 2 3 4 5

• Section 2 – Your opinions about your current university

The following set of statements cover similar topics of the last section. But the context here is different because now your views about the specific university where you are currently studying are requested. Please show the extent to which you ***believe*** your university has the feature described by the statement. once again, Number 1 on the line means you strongly disagree that your university has that feature, and Number 5 means you strongly agree. There are no right or wrong answers – all we are interested in is a number that best shows ***your perceived of performance*** of your current university.

Statement	*Strongly disagree* ⟷ *Strongly agree*
1. My university has skilled and engaging teachers for courses.	1 2 3 4 5
2. My university has nearby pubs, clubs and bars.	1 2 3 4 5
3. My university has industry contacts provided by tutors.	1 2 3 4 5
4. My university has tuition fees at a reasonable expense.	1 2 3 4 5
5. My university has practical skills taught in courses.	1 2 3 4 5
6. My university has nearby sports and recreational facilities.	1 2 3 4 5
7. My university has a helpful career service.	1 2 3 4 5
8. My university provides accommodation charged at a reasonable expense.	1 2 3 4 5
9. My university provides regular access to teaching staff.	1 2 3 4 5
10. My university has cafes and social meeting places.	1 2 3 4 5
11. My university has a variety of library books and journals.	1 2 3 4 5
12. My university has attractive campus layout and appearance.	1 2 3 4 5

13. My university has module variety that offers good value.	1 2 3 4 5
14. My university has easily transferable skills taught.	1 2 3 4 5
15. My university provides opportunities for meeting fellow students.	1 2 3 4 5
16. My university has reputable degree programme.	1 2 3 4 5
17. My university has places on campus to relax during the day.	1 2 3 4 5
18. My university has good computing and web facilities.	1 2 3 4 5

- **Section 3 – Other Measures**

Statement	*Very unsatisfied* ⟷ *Very satisfied*
1. My feelings toward the quality of higher education provided by my university can be best described as:	1 2 3 4 5

2. I think there are other important aspects for constituting high-quality UK higher education and should be included in this questionnaire. They are:

____

____

Part 2 – intercultural Adjustment

- **Section 1 – Your self-evaluation of Psychological Adjustment**

A. Flourishing Scale

Below are 8 statements with which you may agree or disagree. Please indicate your agreement with each item with Number 1 being strongly disagree and Number 5 being strongly agree.

Statement	Strongly disagree ⟷ Strongly agree				
1. I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.	1	2	3	4	5
2. My social relationships are supportive and rewarding.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am engaged and interested in my daily activities.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I actively contribute to the happiness and wellbeing of others.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am a good person and live a good life.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I am optimistic about my future.	1	2	3	4	5
8. People respect me.	1	2	3	4	5

B. Satisfaction with Life Scale

Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Please indicate your agreement with each item with Number 1 being strongly disagree and Number 5 being strongly agree. Please be open and honest in your responding.

Statement	Strongly disagree ⟷ Strongly agree				
1. in most ways my life is close to my ideal.	1	2	3	4	5
2. the conditions of my life are excellent.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am satisfied with my life.	1	2	3	4	5
4. So far I have the important things I want in life.	1	2	3	4	5
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	1	2	3	4	5

- ## Section 2 – Your self-evaluation of Sociocultural Adjustment

Living in a different culture often involves learning new skills and behaviours. Thinking about your life in the UK, please rate your competence at each of the following behaviours (1 = Not at all competent; 5 = Extremely competent).

Statement	*Not at all competent ⟷ Extremely competent*				
Building and maintaining relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
Managing my academic responsibilities.	1	2	3	4	5
interacting at social events.	1	2	3	4	5
Maintaining my hobbies and interests.	1	2	3	4	5
Adapting to the noise level in my neighbourhood.	1	2	3	4	5
Accurately interpreting and responding to other people's gestures and facial expressions.	1	2	3	4	5
Working effectively with other students.	1	2	3	4	5
Obtaining community services I require.	1	2	3	4	5
Adapting to the population density.	1	2	3	4	5
Understanding and speaking English.	1	2	3	4	5
Varying the rate of my speaking in a culturally appropriate manner.	1	2	3	4	5
Gaining feedback from other students to help improve my performance.	1	2	3	4	5
Accurately interpreting and responding to other people's emotions.	1	2	3	4	5
Attending or participating in community activities.	1	2	3	4	5
Finding my way around.	1	2	3	4	5
interacting with members of opposite sex.	1	2	3	4	5
Expressing my ideas to other students in a culturally appropriate manner.	1	2	3	4	5
Dealing with the bureaucracy.	1	2	3	4	5
Adapting to the pace of life.	1	2	3	4	5
Reading and writing English.	1	2	3	4	5
Changing my behaviour to suit social norms, rules, attitudes, beliefs, and customs.	1	2	3	4	5

Part 3– Some information about you

1. Your gender is:
    A. Male
    B. Female
    C. Prefer not to say

2. Please choose the level of study you are in:
    A. Undergraduate (e.g., BA; BSc)
    B. Postgraduate taught (e.g., MA ; MSc ; MPhil)
    C. Postgraduate research (e.g., PhD; etc.)
    D. Other

3. You have been studying in the UK higher education for about ____ months

4. Are you willing to receive the invitation for a follow-up interview that might be sent to you in the future?
    A. Yes (If yes, please provide your email address for future contact: __________________)
    B. No

Thank you for your attention, interest and participation!

Appendix B: Questionnaire for Academic Staff

Your opinon Matters

Quality of the provision of Higher Education in the UK

Instructions:

The issue of 'quality' has been widely discussed in higher education, but there is little consensus on its measurement. However, this research will examine the quality of UK higher education from the perspectives of both Chinese international students and the academics. Therefore, the main purpose of this questionnaire is to ask for your valuable perceptions, from the angle of an academic of Russell Group universities having rich experience in teaching Chinese international students, about the quality of UK higher education.

This questionnaire consists of *four* sections. They are:

- Section 1 that is concerned with your opinions about the features of high-quality UK higher education in general.
- Section 2 specifically concentrating on your opinions about the quality of higher education provided by the university that you are currently working at to Chinese international students.
- Section 3 containing two questions. The first question is a single item relating to your overall satisfaction with the quality of higher education service provided by the university that you are currently working at. The second item is an open question requesting your ideas about other aspects that you might think are quite important to be provided by high-quality UK higher education.
- Section 4 that is to gather some demographic information from you.

Section 1 – Your opinions about UK higher education

The following set of statements relate to your opinions on the features of high-quality UK higher education. from the point of view of an academic, please show how ***important*** you think each statement is for international students to have in UK higher education. Please rate the following statements with Number 1 being not important, and Number 5 being very important. There are no right or wrong answers – all we are interested in is a number that best indicates your ***perception of importance*** of each statement.

Statement	*Not important* ⟷ *Very important*
1. 1. It is important for international students to have skilled and engaging teachers for courses.	1 2 3 4 5
2. It is important for international students to have nearby pubs, clubs and bars.	1 2 3 4 5
3. It is important for international students to have industry contacts provided by tutors.	1 2 3 4 5
4. It is important for international students to have tuition fees at a reasonable expense.	1 2 3 4 5
5. It is important for international students to have practical skills taught in courses.	1 2 3 4 5
6. It is important for international students to have nearby sports and recreational facilities.	1 2 3 4 5
7. It is important for international students to have a helpful career service.	1 2 3 4 5
8. It is important for international students to have accommodation charged at a reasonable expense.	1 2 3 4 5
9. It is important for international students to have regular access to teaching staff.	1 2 3 4 5
10. It is important for international students to have cafes and social meeting places.	1 2 3 4 5
11. It is important for international students to have a variety of library books and journals.	1 2 3 4 5
12. It is important for international students to have attractive campus layout and appearance.	1 2 3 4 5
13. It is important for international students to have module variety that offers good value.	1 2 3 4 5
14. It is important for international students to have easily transferable skills taught.	1 2 3 4 5
15. It is important for international students to have opportunities for meeting fellow students.	1 2 3 4 5
16. It is important for international students to have reputable degree programme.	1 2 3 4 5

17. It is important for international students to have places on campus to relax during the day.	1 2 3 4 5
18. It is important for international students to have good computing and web facilities.	1 2 3 4 5

Part 2 – Your opinions about your current university

The following set of statements cover similar topics in the last section. But the context here is different because now your opinions about the specific university where you are currently working are requested. Please show the extent to which you ***believe*** your university has the feature described by the statement. once again, Number 1 on the line means you strongly disagree that your university has that feature, and Number 5 means you strongly agree. There are no right or wrong answers – all we are interested in is a number that best shows your ***perceived performance of*** your current university.

Statement	*Strongly disagree ⟷ Strongly agree*
1. My university has skilled and engaging teachers for courses.	1 2 3 4 5
2. My university has nearby pubs, clubs and bars.	1 2 3 4 5
3. My university has industry contacts provided by tutors.	1 2 3 4 5
4. My university has tuition fees at a reasonable expense.	1 2 3 4 5
5. My university has practical skills taught in courses.	1 2 3 4 5
6. My university has nearby sports and recreational facilities.	1 2 3 4 5
7. My university has a helpful career service.	1 2 3 4 5
8. My university provides accommodation charged at a reasonable expense.	1 2 3 4 5
9. My university provides regular access to teaching staff.	1 2 3 4 5
10. My university has cafes and social meeting places.	1 2 3 4 5
11. My university has a variety of library books and journals.	1 2 3 4 5
12. My university has attractive campus layout and appearance.	1 2 3 4 5
13. My university has module variety that offers good value.	1 2 3 4 5
14. My university has easily transferable skills taught.	1 2 3 4 5

15. My university provides opportunities for meeting fellow students.	1	2	3	4	5
16. My university has reputable degree programme.	1	2	3	4	5
17. My university has places on campus to relax during the day.	1	2	3	4	5
18. My university has good computing and web facilities.	1	2	3	4	5

Section 3 – Two Other Measures

Statement	*Very unsatisfied* ⟷ *Very satisfied*				
1. My feelings toward the quality of higher education provided by my university can be best described as:	1	2	3	4	5

2. I think there are other features that are important for constituting high-quality UK higher education and should be included in this questionnaire. They are:

____

____

Section 4: Some Personal information about You

5. Your gender is:
   D. Male
   E. Female
   F. Prefer not to say

6. You have been teaching Chinese international students in the UK higher education for about _____ years.

7. Are you willing to receive the invitation for a follow-up interview that might be sent to you in the future?
   A. Yes
   (If yes, please provide your email address for future contact: ___________________)
   B. No

Thank you for your attention, interest and participation!

Appendix C: Participant information Sheet

Study Title: Mind the gap in UK higher education: Exploring higher education quality and intercultural adjustment from the perspectives of Chinese international students and academic staff of UK universities.

Researcher: Xiaotong Zhu **Ethics number**: 23439

This is an invitation for you to participate in a research study. Please take time to read the following information carefully before deciding to take part in this research. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or you would like to know more details about the study. If you are happy to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

This is a postgraduate research student project conducted toward my academic qualification at the University of Southampton. My name is Xiaotong Zhu, a student from China who has had previous experience of teaching other Chinese international students. As a person studying in UK higher education by myself and having experience in working with Chinese international students before, I am interested in making a contribution to their adjustment to UK social and academic environment. In this study, Chinese international students refer to those who are normal residents of China and Chinese passport holders, but have travelled cross border to purpose education.

This research aims to offer better understandings on the following aspects:

a) How is the service quality of UK education from the perspectives of Chinese international students and academic staff of UK universities?
b) How do Chinese international students perceive their own intercultural adjustment to the UK?
c) How are these perceptions related to each other?
d) Are these perceptions changing over time?

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are:

1. A Chinese student who have enrolled in one of UK Russell Group of Universities (the University of Southampton in this case) when this Participant information Sheet is distributed.

   Or

2. An academic working in one of UK Russell Group of Universities (the University of Southampton in this case).

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to complete a questionnaire where items are designed to measure the various concepts mentioned above. The questionnaire is emailed to you by the international office of University of Southampton, and is expected to take you not more than 30 minutes to complete.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

You may enjoy the opportunity of sharing your feelings and experiences in UK higher education, which might inspire you to think further about the topics that are included in this research.

I, as a researcher, will get the benefit from your participation as the information you provide will equip me with the first-hand data of the concepts under investigation. Information from you will also provide empirical supports for this study whose results will help to increase the understanding of the topics involved.

Are there any risks involved?

It is not anticipated that this research will cause you any risks, discomfort or inconvenience.

Will my participation be confidential?

I will comply with the ethical guidelines by British Education Research Association (BERA) and take steps to preserve your confidentiality during and after this study. All the information from you will be safely stored in a password-protected personal computer in compliance with the Data Protection Act / University Policy. only I, the researcher, am able to access the original data. In the final thesis, no identifiable information about you will be included.

What happens if I change my mind?

Your participation is totally voluntary. If you choose not to be involved, you do not need to give any reason. If you change your mind and want to pull out during the participation, you have the right to withdraw at any point. Please note that none of your legal rights will be affected.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In case of concern or complaint about any aspect of this study, you can contact the Head of Research Governance (＋44 （0）2380 595058, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk).

Where can I get more information?

If you would like to get more information about the study, please contact:

Xiaotong Zhu

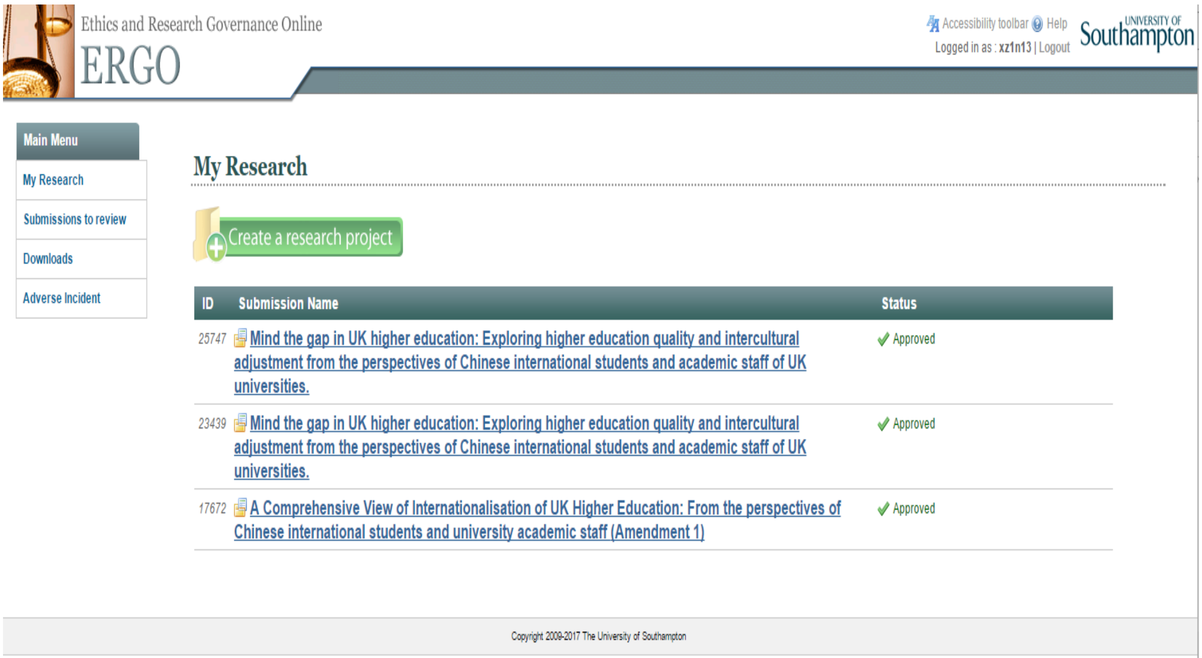
Email: xz1n13@soton.ac.uk

Call: 0044-07510974801

Please tick the box if you agree with the statement:

I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be recorded and used for the purpose of this study. ☐

Appendix D Ethics Approval



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My Research

Create a research project

ID	Submission Name	Status
25747	Mind the gap in UK higher education: Exploring higher education quality and intercultural adjustment from the perspectives of Chinese international students and academic staff of UK universities.	Approved
23439	Mind the gap in UK higher education: Exploring higher education quality and intercultural adjustment from the perspectives of Chinese international students and academic staff of UK universities.	Approved
17672	A Comprehensive View of Internationalisation of UK Higher Education: From the perspectives of Chinese international students and university academic staff (Amendment 1)	Approved

Appendix E: Example of Qualitative Analysis Procedure

Step 1: selection criterion

Student interviewees' comments on the research question 4: How can a high service quality of HE be provided by universities in the UK?

(i.e., what constitutes a high service quality of HE offered by UK universities to Chinese international students?)

Step 2: analytical units:

Coding unit: clear semantic information from the text

Context unit: the whole interview conversation

Recording unit: the five individual interviews with the student interviewees

Step 3：the level of abstraction

Concrete expectations of quality UK HE held by the particular student interviewee. The expectations may relate to that interviewee's previous educational experiences in China HE system and/or in other UK universities. The expectations may also relate to his/her HE experience at the university where he/she is currently studying.

Step 4: initial coding and texts (fourteen initial categories were produced. They described the student interviewees' expectations of quality higher education offered by UK universities):

A1: the importance of the teachers working in the university

I think the most important aspect is the teacher of our university. (Student-participant 1)

It will be better if teacher quality could be improved as well. (Student-participant 1)

First of all, it is the teacher quality of a university. It is the most important factor. Based on my learning experiences till now as a master students, the teachers play a key role. (Student-participant 3)

I pay a lot of attention to teachers. Because I feel that they can, no matter through their specialised knowledge or their personal values, influence students unconsciously. (Student-participant 5)

A2: the importance of teachers' accent

Their accent. My English listening is not very competent, but their accent makes the situation worse... some teachers have strong accent, such as indian accent. Their accent is a problem. (Student-participant 1)

The teacher's accent. For example, we cannot understand some teachers with Indian accent. (Student-participant 2)

A3: the importance of improving the quality of the students

I still think improving the student quality is important. (Student-participant 1)

A4: the teachers' academic qualification and competency

I think all the teachers need to have the doctor degree. The teachers have high academic competence. (Student-participant 2)

It (teacher quality) includes academic qualifications and competence of the teacher. (Student-participant 3)

A5: the importance of providing career support

Another factor is the career prospect of graduates, which can be used to evaluate the service quality of HE of a university. I feel that nowadays universities need to pay a lot of attentions to their graduates' career and further development. (Student 1)

A6: the importance of lecture rooms/library provided by the university

I think the classroom where we have lectures and the library are very important for a student's daily learning. These two are the most important for our daily learning experience. In terms of library, if it could be open for 24 hours, have enough studying areas, and printing machines. (Student-participant 1)

The *room size needs to depend on the number of students… But the size should be reasonable. Sometimes if you feel unhappy about it, you can just escape that lecture. If the room is too crowded, my motivation is affected*. (Student-participant 1)

A7: **the importance of making sure that accepted international students met the admission requirement**

The*re are some criteria to be met by applicants. These criteria exist for some reasons…Applicants have to reach this standard to be admitted. For example, they need to have enough knowledge about the subject and an ability to understand what is taught, in order to be accepted by unis. If they fail to meet the standard, their learning will be hard.* (Student-participant 3)

A8: the importance of assessment

I think the exams are quite necessary. Students need an efficient way to be assessed...Even the mid-term exams and assignments are necessary. Although I don't like exams, I feel they are helpful for my study and make me keep motivated. (Student-participant 3)

Some of my friends, even though they are studying at Masters' level, still think the assessment are not with high standard. There should be a high requirement for students...I mean academically. (Student-participant 4)

A9: the importance of teaching

Teachers and the quality of their teaching... Including the course content, the course arrangement, and the design of assignments and exams. I think they are the, in the first place, important. (Student-participant 4).

A10: the importance of teaching knowledge of the industry

Another point is that besides the knowledge about the finance in China, we need to have more contacts with the finance in UK. For example, we need to know what qualifications we have to get to enter the finance area in the UK. (Student-participant 4)

A11: teachers of undergraduates at UK universities having more academic competency than teachers of undergraduates at Chinese universities

In *China, although some universities are good, I still feel many teachers of undergraduates in those universities are not very academically competent. Teachers of postgraduates may be better. But in the UK, I feel even teachers of undergraduates are very professional and competent.* (Student-participant 5)

A12: the importance of surrounding learning/language (English) atmosphere nurtured by the university

Actually, I even do not want to attend every lecture. In a lecture, most of the classmates are Chinese. In last semester when we had many Chinese students using Chinese directly to ask questions. All the discussions during the lecture time were all in Chinese as well. I feel that I am learning in China, not in the UK. (Student-participant 1)

Soft (environment) is the learning atmosphere of the university. It includes the school motto, its history, its expectations of students, its plan for the future development and so on. (Student-participant 4)

Another important factor (for a high service quality) might be environment. I mean, language environment. As English has become the mainstream language of the world, I think a good language-learning environment is helpful for improving English competence. Especially leaning English in an English-speaking country. (Student-participant 4).

A13: the importance of teachers' patient attitude toward questions asked by students

For a teacher, the question (students asked) may be easy. But students need more explanations. Therefore, patience is very important. They need to answer students' questions clearly, thoroughly and patiently. It will also affect students' attitude. Teachers' attitude is important. If their attitude is good, students will feel more motivated to learn deeper and more. (Student-participant 3)

A14: the importance of facilitates provided by the university

The environment of a university is also important. I mean facilities. For example, for students like us, who do a lot of calculations, facilities for reading are enough. But for those who study engineering, they need to a lot of labs. So whether a university can provide these facilities are important. (Student-participant 2)

I think teaching facilities are also very important. For example, I can't hear clearly the teacher when having classes. In a very big classroom, the teacher only wore a very small microphone. The quality of this aspect is not very good. In addition, the projector used in the class. In a big classroom, I can't clearly read what the teacher write on the blackboard. (Student-participant 2)

Another point is about the campus environment, including soft and hard environment. Hard environment is about facilitates and equipment provided by the university. (Student-participant 4)

Step 5: Category frequencies within this example process

initial category	Number of occurrence	% of occurrence	Number of interviewees mentioned this category
A1	4	16%	3
A2	2	8%	2
A3	1	4%	1
A4	2	8%	2
A5	1	4%	1
A6	2	8%	1
A7	1	4%	1
A8	2	8%	2
A9	1	4%	1
A10	1	4%	1
A11	1	4%	1
A12	3	12%	2
A13	1	4%	1
A14	3	12%	2
total	25	100%	5 student interviewees

Step 6: Four main categories/themes – initial categories were further grouped

Main category	Annotation of the main category	Component initial category	Number of occurrence of the main category
B1 Teacher quality	Expectations related to teachers or their teaching practice	A1, A2, A4, A9, A11, A13	11

B2: Fellow student quality	Expectations related to ensuring the quality of Chinese international students who are admitted by UK universities	A3, A7, A8	4
B3: Learning atmosphere	Expectations related to the learning atmosphere nurtured by UK universities	A12	3
B3: Tangibles	Expectations related to the physical characteristics of UK universities	A6, A14	5
B4: Career support	Expectations related to receiving help for future career	A5, A10	2

Step 7: Reviewing the four main categories/themes

The researcher read all the collated extracts for individual main category to make sure exacts are closely related to its overarching main category and that there are recognisable distinctions between main categories.

Appendix F: Tables for Quantitative Results

Table AF. 1: Results of one-way ANOVA: mean SQ scored by student-participants at different study levels

Study level	N	Mean SQ
Undergraduate	37	.23
Postgraduate taught	86	.25
Postgraduate research	11	.09
Other	3	.37

Table AF.2: Results of one-way ANOVA: mean SQ among student-participants at different study levels and of different genders

Test type	df	F	Sig.
Mean SQ with students' study levels	3	.45	.720
Mean SQ with student gender	2	.85	.432

Table AF.3: Results of independent *t*-test: mean SQ scored by female and male staff participants

	Gender	Mean	SE	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean SQ	Male	.14	.10	2.36	23	.027
	Female	-.30	.17			

Table AF. 4: Mauchly's test of sphericitya: student and staff participants' perceptions of SQ against four HE factors

Status	Within-Subjects Effect	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.	Epsilon[b] Greenhouse-Geisser
Student	SQ	33.549	5	.000	.88
Academic Staff	SQ	5.071	5	.408	.87

Table AF.5: Pairwise comparisons: SQ (scored by student-participants) between factors of HE

Status	(I) Factor (Mean SQ ± SD)	(J) Factor (Mean SQ ± SD)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Student	Leisure (-.25 ± .72)	Academic (.45 ± .54)	-.693*	.000
		Industry Link (.30 ± .83)	-.541*	.000
		Cost (.60 ± .91)	-.845*	.000
	Industry Link	Cost	-.305*	.008
		Academic	.152	.191
	Academic	Cost	-.152	.181

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

.

Table AF.6: SQ (scored by student-participants) for each factor of HE

		I-P Gap (Mean SQ)	t	df	Sig.
Factor 1	Leisure	-.25	-4.05	138	.000
Factor 2	Academic	.45	9.77	138	.000
Factor 3	IndustryLink	.30	4.27	138	.000
Factor 4	Cost	.60	7.73	138	.000

Table AF.7： Pairwise comparisons: SQ (scored by academic staff participants) between factors of HE

Status	**(I) Factor (Mean SQ ±SD)**	**(J) Factor (Mean SQ ± SD)**	**Mean Difference (I-J)**	**Sig.[b]**
Academic Staff	Leisure (-.52 ± .76)	Academic (.29 ± .44)	-.801*	.000
		Industry Link (-.05± .88)	-.458	.000
		Cost factor (.28± 1.02)	-.791*	.002
	Industry Link	Cost	-.333	1.000
		Academic	-.343	.334
	Academic	Cost	.010	1.000

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

Table AF.8： Mauchly's test of sphericity:[a] Student and staff participants' perceptions of Importance against four factors of HE

Status	**Within-Subjects Effect**	**Approx. Chi-Square**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Epsilon[b] Greenhouse-Geisser**
Student	Importance	49.13	5	.000	.850
Academic Staff	Importance	11.86	5	.037	.747

Table AF.9： Pairwise Comparisons： Importance scores (by student and staff participants) between factors of HE

Status	(I) Factor (Mean Importance ± SD)	(J) Factor (Mean Importance ± SD)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Students	Leisure (3.62 ± .63)	Academic Factor (4.33 ± .47)	-.72*	.000
		Industry Link (3.95 ± .67)	-.33*	.000
		Cost (4.08 ± .64)	-.47*	.000
	Industry Link	Academic	-.39*	.000
		Cost	-.14	.283
	Cost	Academic	-.25*	.000
Academic Staff	Academic (4.60 ± .38)	Leisure (3.78 ± .51)	.83*	.000
		Industry Link (3.87 ± .67)	.74*	.000
		Cost (4.07 ± .57)	.53*	.000
	Leisure	Industry Link	-.09	1.000
		Cost	-.30	.121
	Industry Link	Cost	-.21	1.000

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table AF.10: Descriptive: student-participants' intercultural adjustment against gender and level of study

Categories		N	Mean	Std. Error
Gender	Prefer not to say	4	3.7921	.29
	Male	51	3.7911	.06
	Female	82	3.6445	.06
	total	137	3.7034	.04
Study Level	Undergraduate	37	3.6717	.07
	Postgraduate taught	86	3.7520	.045
	Postgraduate research	11	3.5915	.13
	Other	3	3.1099	.10
	total	137	3.7034	.04

Table AF.11: ANOVA: student-participants' intercultural adjustment against gender and level of study

		df	F	Sig.
Ad against gender	Between Groups	2	1.945	.147
	Within Groups	134		
	Total	136		
Ad against study level	Between Groups	3	2.685	.059
	Within Groups	133		
	Total	136		