

**Pilot project**

Navigating life in the UK without losing yourself in the process: developing psychological and social capital for Chinese direct entry students

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University of Greenwich



Pilot project into the international student experience in the UK  
2018-19

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## Navigating life in the UK without losing yourself in the process: developing psychological and social capital for Chinese direct entry students University of Greenwich

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Highly commended for the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International  
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“January and February was a very difficult time for me and I could not get through without the teaching team.”

## 1. Motivation for the project

Recruitment of international students has become a strategic priority for many UK higher education institutions (UKHEIs). More international students enter UKHEIs through particular entry requirements than direct entrants. The direct entry mode has been a popular choice for Chinese international students. The fast growth in Chinese Direct Entry (CDE) students in UKHEIs has been an exciting yet sometimes difficult story, which poses many challenges to the whole sector. Apart from acculturative stress and depression experienced by some due to cultural differences (Wei et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2008), many CDEs experience ‘learning shock’ (Griffith et al., 2005), characterised by acute frustration, confusion, and anxiety as a result of differences between the UK and Chinese educational systems (Bradshaw, 2004), especially different beliefs about knowledge and the process of teaching and learning (Kember, 2001; Biggs, 1996).

In fact, many CDEs are under-supported. They are usually launched into programmes with other students already familiar with the UKHE environment and available support (Christie et al., 2013). Being expected to settle in the host country cultural and learning environment and be ready to perform under time pressure, CDEs usually face a steeper learning curve (Quan et al., 2013). Without sufficient understanding of differences between UK and Chinese national cultures and education systems, it is common that in their academic lives, CDEs employ inadequate learning strategies, have lower academic achievement, and poor integration into UKHEIs (Wang et al., 2012; Phakiti et al., 2013). In their non-academic lives, they are also more likely to experience loneliness, isolation, and sometimes discrimination, which hinder their wellbeing (Zhang et al., 2012).

## 2. Aims

The aim of the pilot project was to develop CDEs psychological (eg hope, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience) and social capital (eg, support networks) through five bespoke workshops, to provide them with resources to cope with the challenges in a foreign cultural environment. Considering time as a factor for capital development and the process of cross-cultural adjustment (Oberg, 1960), each workshop theme reflected the developmental needs of students at a certain time. In addition, the workshop design was based on a scaffolding approach to learning (Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010) and therefore training content shifted from teacher-centred activities to student-centred ones.



## 3. Outcomes

50 CDEs were recruited, with 31 attending one workshop and 11 attending two workshops. Eight received certificates of workshop completion because they participated in at least four workshops. The project was evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Results indicate that the programme of workshops effectively enhanced student psychological capital of hope, resilience, and confidence, and cross-cultural adjustment. Qualitative feedback suggested students became more confident in developing social networks. This pilot project was also effective because it raised the institutional awareness of the needs of CDEs, generated training resources, and disseminated its impact internally and externally.

## 4. About University of Greenwich

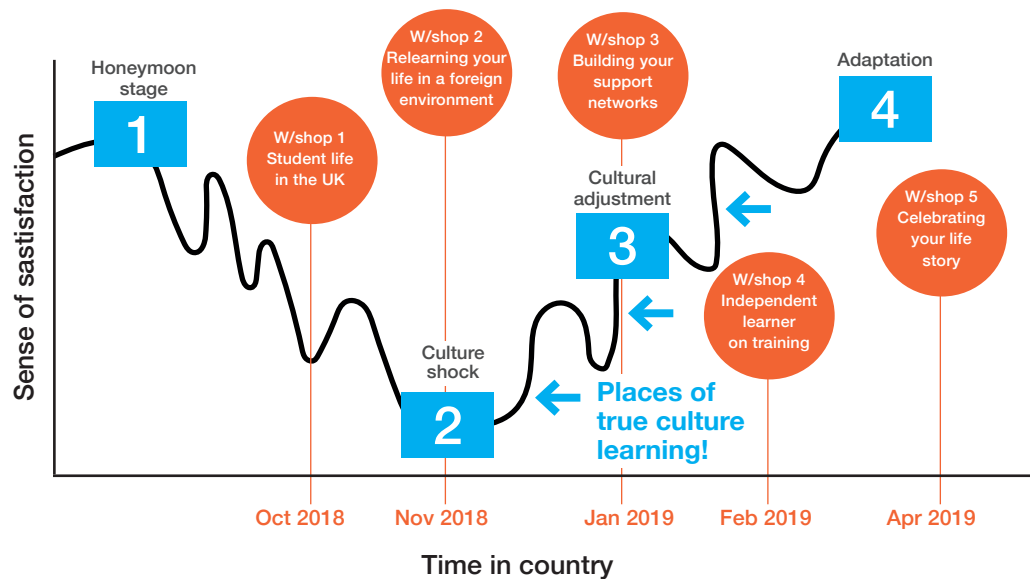
The University of Greenwich (UoG) is located on the banks of the River Thames in London and the historic Chatham Maritime in Kent. It is also one of the few London universities that has a central campus with all facilities in one place. The university has a diverse community of UK based and overseas students totaling just over 39,000 students, representing over 140 countries. In China, the University has 12 TNE partners who send their students to complete their studies in the UK.

In 2018-19, there were over 400 CDE students recruited to the UoG and 95% of them studied at the Business Faculty. Many CDEs encounter academic challenges. They apply inadequate learning strategies leading to lower academic achievement and poor integration into UKHEIs (Wang et al., 2012; Phakiti et al., 2013). Belief about knowledge and the process of teaching and learning brings particular challenges. (Kember, 2001; Biggs, 1996).

## 5. Delivery

A scaffolding approach (Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010) was employed to offer dynamic training workshops across two academic terms. The scaffolding approach, shifting from instructor responsibility, joint responsibility, to student

Figure 1. Cultural shock and cross-cultural adjustment (adapted from Oberg, 1960)



responsibility, is thought to provide a practical way to help students acquire necessary skills to develop psychological and social capital for effective cross-cultural and academic adaptation.

The workshops were timed in accordance with the four key stages of cross-cultural adjustment (See Figure 1), ie, honeymoon, culture shock, cultural adjustment and adaptation (Oberg, 1960). Each workshop took place on a Saturday for three hours learning and one-hour lunch, between October

2018 and April 2019. Table 1 shows the workshops details, including the time each workshop was run, learning outcomes and main activities for each workshop.

## 6. Evaluation

To evaluate the effectiveness of the project aim, ie, developing CDEs' psychological and social capital, both quantitative and qualitative measures were used. For the quantitative data, students' psychological capital was measured by scales of

Table 1. Dynamic developmental workshops

Workshop 1: Student life in the UK (October 2018)		
Activities	Activity mode	Learning outcome
Common challenges faced by Chinese learners	Lecture	Understanding acculturative stress and stress-management techniques
Stress and time management practices	Student-centred group activity	
Workshop 2: Relearning your life in a foreign environment (November 2018)		
Activities	Activity mode	Learning outcome
Communication skills	Lecture	Developing behavioural strategies for successful adaptation to UK and UKHE
Awkward moments in life	Group discussion	
Do you understand me? (The Johari window scenario discussion)	Student-centred group activity	
Overcoming communication barriers experience sharing using a Lego game	Student-centred group activity	
Workshop 3: Building your support networks (January 2019)		
Activities	Activity mode	Learning outcome
Catchball game	Student-centred group activity	Developing social networks through experiential learning exercises; self-awareness through reflection
Speed networking	Student-centred group activity	
Time exercise and reflection	Individual exercise, followed by group discussion	
Workshop 4: Independent learner on training (February 2019)		
Activities	Activity mode	Learning outcome
How to make great presentations the Pecha Kucha way	Lecture	Developing competencies for effective communications; building up professionalism
Say STOP Activity (scenario)	Student-centred group activity	
Workshop 5: Celebrating your life story (April 2019)		
Activities	Activity mode	Learning outcome
Postgraduate study experience sharing	Lecture	Presentation skills; developing academic self-efficacy

**Table 2 Students' psychological capital and cross-cultural adjustment**

Variable	Workshop 1 (Oct 2018) No of responses: 32	Workshop 5 (Apr 2019) No of responses: 10
<b>V1. Academic self-efficacy</b>	Mean = 4.77 [s.d.= 1.04]	Mean = 5.59 [s.d.= 0.75]
– Course efficacy	Mean = 4.58 [s.d.= 0.81]	Mean = 5.34 [s.d.= 0.99]
– Roommate efficacy	Mean = 4.97 [s.d.= 0.98]	Mean = 5.69 [s.d.= 1.10]
– Social efficacy	Mean = 4.77 [s.d.= 1.04]	Mean = 5.75 [s.d.= 0.52]
<b>V2. Hope</b>	Mean = 5.69 [s.d.= 0.81]	Mean = 6.13 [s.d.= 0.31]
<b>V1. Cross-cultural adjustment</b>	Mean = 4.75 [s.d.= 0.75]	Mean = 5.39 [s.d.= 0.76]
– General adjustment	Mean = 4.77 [s.d.= 0.80]	Mean = 5.33 [s.d.= 0.87]
– Interaction adjustment	Mean = 4.48 [s.d.= 0.99]	Mean = 5.30 [s.d.= 0.79]
– Work adjustment	Mean = 5.08 [s.d.= 0.60]	Mean = 5.67 [s.d.= 1.04]

The scale of all measures is 7-pt Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

academic self-efficacy (Solberg et al., 1993), hope (Snyder et al., 1996), and three dimensions of cross-cultural adjustment (Black & Stephens, 1988). Short surveys were distributed to students in the first and the last workshops. For the qualitative data, students were asked to give feedback after the workshop three speed networking exercise, and after workshop five.

Table 2 shows the mean scores in students' academic self-efficacy, hope, and cross-cultural adjustment before and after the workshops. Although the score of each variable increased, it was unsuitable to test the statistical significance due to unequal sample sizes. In addition, it was not feasible to compare these scores between students who attended and students who did not attend the workshops due to the low response rate.

After Workshop 3, 13 participants were invited to complete a feedback survey with the question "How would you describe your experience today to others who did not attend?" Seven responses were received. The following two quotes, to some extent, capture the development of social capital.

**"The best part of this activity is to reduce the tension and pressure of students in inter-cultural communication. After trying, I can understand that socialising with students in other countries is not as difficult as I imagined. The difference in language does not affect communication. The event was very good and built my confidence in the socialisation."**

**"Through this activity, I found it was really good for me, because I had more chances to touch more local people and know many things like free museums, how to find a part-time job and other things from them. What's more, because of this activity, I have a new friend. If you have time, please don't miss this activity!"**

At the end of Workshop 5, students were asked to share with us what they liked about the workshops and what we should improve. The following quotes

from them, to some extent, capture the development of psychological capital.

**"I am really grateful for the teaching team. January and February was a very difficult time for me and I could not get through without the teaching team. I enjoyed each workshop. For example, in the second workshop, I liked the game Dr Yang Yang did with us. In the third workshop, Crystal shared many ways to release stress. In the fourth workshop, Jing taught us a life philosophy of 'Making efforts constantly, taking the results lightly,' was very helpful. It changed me a lot and I don't feel upset easily."**

**"These workshops have helped freshman like me to integrate into English learning and life more quickly. The most useful help is to enhance my confidence in cross-cultural communication."**

**"Workshops are a great way of learning. They helped me not only on learning, but also on emotional intelligence."**

**"Hope the workshops will go on in the next few years because they are useful and helpful. I was upset and frustrated before I attended the first workshop."**

## 7. Timescale

The project ran between September 2018 and July 2019. The project progressed on time and to budget but with two minor changes to the original timescale, due to student and staff availability. First, several workshop participants were not available due to end-of-term one coursework submissions and beginning-of-term two exams, therefore, workshop three was shifted from December 2018 to January in 2019. Accordingly, workshop four was shifted from January to February 2019. Secondly, due to institutional policy changes and budget constraints, we were not able to use the proposed web platform (i.e. Articulate) to share materials with students. Instead, a closed group on Facebook was created and workshop materials were regularly

Figure 2. Project timescale

	Task	Aug 2018	Sep 2018	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	Mar 2019	Apr 2019	May 2019	Jun 2019	Jul 2019
1	Student recruitment											
2	Workshop 1: Student life in the UK											
3	Workshop 2: Relearning your life in a foreign environment											
4	Workshop 3: Building your support networks											
5	Workshop 4: Independent learner on training											
6	Progress report											
7	Workshop 5: Celebrating your life story											
8	Data analysis and development of highlighted workshop activities											
9	Evaluate report and write final report for UKCISA											

updated to participants. In addition, the teaching team posted videos and blog posts from the public domain that would enhance cross-cultural communication, networking, and language learning. Occasionally, event opportunities or part-time job vacancies were also shared on the Facebook group page. The actual project timescale is shown in Figure 2.

## 8. Reflections

There were a few challenges in the process of project delivery. Some issues were related to resources and logistics, other issues were related to student motivation and commitment, and there were also some unexpected findings.

Regarding resources and logistics, the considerable work involved in this project was not calculated within the project team's teaching workload. To



ease the burden of staff travel, the project team chose the workshop venue to be in the Maritime campus. In addition, the timing of workshops (ie Saturdays), which was initially chosen to avoid student timetabling clashes, eventually became difficult for students who needed to travel from other campuses to the Maritime campus without the university shuttle bus services on the weekends. As a result, it lowered the interests of CDEs in other campuses to participate in the programme.

Due to the programme design, it was believed that students would gain the maximum benefit by attending all five workshops. However, motivating students who expressed an initial interest in the programme but declined to commit over the long-term due to various reasons (eg academic pressures) can be disheartening and required a degree of staff resilience. A significant drop-out occurred in January 2019 and this might be due to students feeling adapted after months of stay in the UK and requiring no further support. Some students tended to arrive late and the waiting time caused delays in material delivery.

Regarding unexpected findings, it was discovered that CDEs tended to have high expectations for their study-abroad experience, with goals of graduating with at least a 2:1 degree, a postgraduate study offer, and maybe some work experience in forms of volunteering, internships, or through the University student job shop. However, most encountered the reality-expectation gap, which lowered their satisfaction with UoG and impacted on their intentions to continue postgraduate studies.



“What the project team offered to CDEs was actually support for learners who attend the UKHE for the first time without sufficient skills and confidence to develop resources to become independent and resilient learners.”

Another discovery was that CDEs would like to participate in mainstream student activities (eg student societies, Student Union events) within the University and communicate effectively with other learners. However, they felt distressed when unable to express themselves clearly and some expressed a feeling of being discriminated against. A further discovery was that most CDEs rarely socialised with other non-Chinese students and for many of them, the workshops were the only extracurricular activities they had participated in.

## 9. Impact

The team strongly believes in the sustainability of this project because of the high level of staff engagement and the institution-wide impact. The participant recruitment effort was supported by multiple programme leaders from five departments in the Business Faculty and the School of Engineering and Science. The workshops information was circulated regularly in the Business Faculty newsletters. The programme was promoted effectively through internal presentations to other professional services units such as the Student Union, Greenwich Language Connect, Information and Library Service, and the International Office. In addition, a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) workshop on supporting Chinese Direct Entry students, available for all staff, was delivered three times by Dr Yang Yang in the project team. Hence, the university staff and other student communities are more aware of the culture of and the unique needs of Chinese students. A mutual trust and willingness to share between different communities was nurtured. Also, the team presented this project in the UoG Business Faculty's Teaching and Learning Festival and at the 2019 UKCISA annual conference. Our presentations were well-received. One UKCISA participant commented that it was the best support resources offered to Chinese international students.

## 10. Sustainability

In retrospect, what the project team offered to CDEs was actually support for learners who attend the UKHE for the first time without sufficient skills and confidence to develop resources to become independent and resilient learners. Therefore the support recipients could also include other DEs, undergraduate and postgraduate international students, and even some first year undergraduates. Therefore, a proposal was submitted to Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and was approved for internal funding. The project will be scaled up and delivered to wider student communities in the academic year 2019-20, in a slightly modified form. That is, five workshops, each with a different theme, will still be run, but each workshop will be delivered twice in different campuses. Students do not need to commit to all five workshops, although a certificate from Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) will be issued to recognise students who participate in the full programme.

Our new programme provision is in line with the University of Greenwich Academic and Student Experience Strategy 2018-22. The new project's aim is to create a learning environment where learners from different backgrounds can learn about UK Higher Education, understand what is expected from them (for example in their attitudes and behaviours) at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and how to develop cultural intelligence (CQ) to navigate in a culturally diverse environment like UoG. In addition, in this welcome, inclusive, and engaging learning community, students can 1) share their study and life experiences, 2) vocalise their worries and concerns, 3) network with learners from different countries and provide peer support, 4) learn how home students develop their employability skills, and 5) obtain information about postgraduate studies.





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## 13. Links to documents used in the project

University of Greenwich Academic and Student Experience Strategy 2018-22: <https://docs.gre.ac.uk/rep/vco/academic-and-student-experience-strategy>

1. Workshop 1: Student life in the UK highlighted activities: <http://tiny.cc/dwvgaz>
2. Workshop 2: Relearning your life in a foreign environment highlighted activities <http://tiny.cc/50kfaz>
3. Workshop 3: Building your support networks highlighted activities <http://tiny.cc/69wgaz>

4. Workshop 4: Independent learner on training  
highlighted activities <http://tiny.cc/yzmfaz>
5. Workshop 5: Celebrating your life story  
highlighted activities <http://tiny.cc/irzgaz>

## 14. Recommendations for other UK institutions

**1** Critically review how you work with CDEs, before implementing any workshop interventions with them

It is always worth the effort and time to find out more about your CDE students, although there are numerous empirical studies about them. We conducted an interview with our targeted students a year before the UKCISA project was implemented.

**2** Provide role models to whom CDEs can relate and trust, before offering any practical strategies and guidance.

For CDE students, the first year is a very intensive learning and life experience. Provide them with a vision for success by connecting them with genuine role models. This role model could help CDEs to identify the meaning and relevance of the advice and strategies delivered in the workshops.

**3** Make the extra-curricular workshops not only fun and playful, but also intellectually stimulating.

To keep the CDEs engaged with all five workshops, we tried different pedagogical approaches, eg, gameful learning, dialogical learning and lectures. When we interviewed our students afterwards, most critical incidents they recalled were the ones that challenged their self-perception and assumptions.

## 15. Research team

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The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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