I am the author of the thesis entitled ‘Learning Context in Australian Universities – Perceptions of Chinese Accounting Students’ submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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'I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct'

**Full Name:** Grace S P Wong

**Signed:**

**Date:** 15th November 2012
DECLARATION

I certify that the thesis entitled ‘Learning Context in Australian Universities – Perceptions of Chinese Accounting Students’ submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given.

I also certify that any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree by any university or institution is identified in the text.

'I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct'

**Full Name:** Grace S P Wong

**Signed:**

**Date:** 15th November 2012
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Grace S P Wong

15th November, 2012
# Table of Contents

## Chapter 1  INTRODUCTION
1.1 Aims and Justification of the Research  
1.2 Contribution to the Literature  
1.3 Research Questions  
1.4 Method  
1.5 Chapter Structures  

## Chapter 2  STUDENT LEARNING AND THE LEARNING CONTEXT  
2.1 Student Learning  
2.2 Student Approaches to Learning  
  2.2.1 Deep, Surface and Strategic approaches  
  2.2.2 Different learning approaches in different disciplines  
  2.2.3 Impact of situational and related factors on students’ learning  
2.3 Learning Style  
2.4 Evaluating Conceptions of Learning  
2.5 The Presage-Process-Product (3Ps) model by Biggs  
2.6 Seminal Research by Ramsden  
  2.6.1 Learning outcomes  
  2.6.2 Approaches to learning  
    2.6.2.1 The myth of rote learning  
    2.6.2.2 Memorisation in Learning  
  2.6.3 Perception of task requirements  
2.6.4 Context of learning  
  2.6.4.1 Teaching, teacher/student relationship  
  2.6.4.2 Assessment  

Page  
1  
2  
4  
6  
7  
7  
9  
12  
13  
17  
20  
22  
23  
28  
32  
34  
34  
35  
39  
42  
45  
46  
47
Chapter 5  FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

– Perceived Context of Learning

5.1 Students’ experience in China
   5.1.1 Teaching
   5.1.2 Assessment
   5.1.3 Teacher/student relationship
   5.1.4 Workload
   5.1.5 English language

5.2 Students’ perceptions in Australia
   5.2.1 Teaching
      5.2.1.1 Teaching quality and delivery
      5.2.1.2 Teaching Attitude
   5.2.2 Assessment
   5.2.3 Teacher/student relationship
      5.2.3.1 Limited contact – time
      5.2.3.2 Size of lecture
      5.2.3.3 Barrier to Communication
      5.2.3.4 Cultural differences
   5.2.4 Workload
   5.2.5 English language
      5.2.5.1 Australian accent
      5.2.5.2 Other unfamiliar accents

Chapter 6  FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

– The Influence of the Perceived Context

6.1 The influence of the perceived context of learning
   6.1.1 Teaching
   6.1.2 Assessment
   6.1.3 Teacher/student relationship
   6.1.4 Workload
   6.1.5 English language
List of Tables

2.1 Learning outcomes and Bloom’s Taxonomy of educational objectives

2.2 Defining features of approaches to Learning

2.3 Motive and strategy in approaches to learning and studying

2.4 Dimensions of learning environments

3.1 Differences in teacher/student and student/student Interaction related to the Collectivism versus. Individualism dimension

3.2 Expectations of British and Chinese students

3.3 Chinese student experiences and perceptions compared with UK Higher Education attitudes

3.4 Differences in teacher/student and student/student interaction related to the Power/Distance dimension

4.1 Student distribution by year and gender
List of Figures

Figure 2.1  Biggs’ general model of student learning
Figure 2.2  Student learning in context Model
Figure 4.1  Areas of focus - Student learning context
Figure 4.2  Approach to data collection
Figure 7.1  Students’ previous educational experience and current perceptions
Figure 7.2  Mainland Chinese students’ response towards the learning context
Figure 7.3  Students’ learning and response
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Overseas education has always been popular with students from Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, India, Vietnam and Mainland China. Among other well developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand, Australia has been receiving increasing numbers of international students undertaking university studies in the past two decades. In fact, an exponential increase in international student numbers in Australian universities has made Australia the third largest provider of international degrees behind the United States and the United Kingdom (Harman, 2004). Australia has become one of the countries of choice for tertiary education by Asian students, due to its geographical location (the closest Western country to Asia), reasonable and affordable tuition fees and its globally recognised qualifications. According to Bohm et al., (2002) and Fischer (2004), global demand for international higher education is expected to grow substantially in the next 15 years or so. Australia had the highest percentage of international students (18.7 per cent), among countries surveyed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperative Development in 2005 (OECD, 2005) and the percentage was anticipated to increase further in the future. Research also indicates that the demand for Australian international tertiary education will grow to approximately 290,000 in 2025, a total growth of nearly 80 per cent over 20 years (Banks et al., 2007). A recent survey indicated there were approximately 143,000 international students studying in Australian universities between March and May 2010 (International Student Survey, 2010).

In particular, the number of students from Mainland China has increased exponentially in recent years, compared to students from other parts of Asia. This is evidenced by Yee (2004), who noted that Mainland China is the second top market for RMIT University, which is a leading institution in attracting overseas students to Australia.
The figures released in 2006 by Australian Education International indicate that China provided more than twice as many university students as any other country (Morton, 2006). According to Australian Education International (2009), China is Australia’s largest market for international students. It was estimated that Chinese student enrolments exceeded 150,000 in 2009, of which around 50,000 were in higher education. It was also predicted that there will be more than 200,000 Chinese student enrolments in Australia by 2011.

1.1 AIMS AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH
The provision of education for international students is important to Australia, as it has become Australia’s third largest services export (Sawir, 2005). Further, any improvement in the educational experience of international students will pave the way to building a more positive reputation for Australian institutions and subsequently a source of revenue for Australia (Sawir, 2005). Therefore, with the increasing numbers of Mainland Chinese students coming to Australia for tertiary education in recent years, there is a need to understand and investigate the learning experiences of Mainland Chinese students. As the shared values of Chinese students are very different from those in the Western countries, arguably so are their learning preferences.

There have been some empirical studies on the learning of international Chinese students in a Western environment that have been documented in the literature. However, this study is unique in that, it looks specifically at Chinese students from Mainland China studying accounting, hence excluding Chinese students from other Confucian heritage countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong etc, who are generally more exposed to Western values and teaching.

As observed by Ramsden (1981), research from the standpoint of the students (rather than that of the educator) can provide more profound knowledge of student learning in a university environment. A more favourable learning environment in the eyes of the students will in turn promote more conceptual and deeper forms of learning and hence, better learning outcomes. This study aims to deepen the understanding of the
educational experience, perceptions and hence response of non-English speaking Mainland Chinese students in a Western learning environment. Such an understanding is imperative in an attempt to support international students from countries that do not share the same education philosophy as that in Australia, such as the concentration on active learning in Australia (Varga-Ackins and Ashcroft, 2004). This is especially essential and vital as ‘leaving the social comfort of home country for study in a foreign country, language and culture can be a harrowing experience…’ (Hellsten and Prescott, 2004, p. 347) to most international students. Thus, this study is motivated by a need to understand the interaction between students and their learning environment (previously in China and currently in Australia). The literature indicates that international students from a non-English speaking background have greater difficulties adjusting and adapting to a Western learning environment. Studies by Lee and Rice (2007), Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) and Mori (2000), have indicated that the key factors contributing to the difficulties international students face include country of origin (in terms of language and culture), inadequate social support from the host country, obstacles in forging friendships, and associated negative experiences in the host country. Therefore, there is an argument that academic staff should make special efforts to accommodate the needs of international students, especially when they first arrive (Hellsten and Prescott, 2004).

It has also been pointed out by Volet and Renshaw (1996) that the magnitude of individual differences amongst the international population of students in universities has been underestimated. Further, according to Meyer and Eley (1999, p. 198) ‘…individual students might well adopt differentiated patterns of learning behaviours that are attributable to the learning contexts shaped by different subjects. That is, perceptions and experiences of learning contexts might be shaped also by the epistemology of a discipline and they might therefore vary considerably from one discipline to another.’
1.2 CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERATURE

There are numerous studies conducted on international students’ experiences and perceptions of learning in the Western learning environment (Hellsten, 2002; East, 2001; Sherry et al., 2004; Andrade, 2006; Abeysekera, 2008; Campbell and Li, 2008; Gan, 2009; Lee, 2010). However, a review of the literature shows that relatively little research has been undertaken on international accounting students’ perceptions of the learning context in which they study (Abraham, 2002). Further, the majority of research has concentrated on either the teaching context or the learning outcomes which have been substantially covered in the literature. There is also considerable literature on student’s approaches to learning from both Western and Chinese backgrounds (see for example: Duff and Mckinstry, 2007; Lucas and Mladenovic, 2004; Gow et al., 1994; Abhayawansa, 2010; Hall et al., 2004; Hassall and Joyce, 2001, Biggs, 1987a, 1987b, 1990, 1991, Watkins and Hattie, 1985) but comparatively little research on undergraduate accounting students’ perceptions of the Australian learning context. The few studies on learning context include Wang and Shan’s (2007) work on postgraduate students; Jackling (2005a; 2005b) who explored accounting students’ views of the learning environment and learning approaches in Australia; Campbell and Li (2008) who investigated Asian students in New Zealand; Ferreira and Santoso (2008) who looked at the effect of accounting students perceptions; and Lizzio et al., (2002) who undertook research on a cross disciplinary sample of university students’ perceptions etc.

More importantly, there is a dearth of literature on Mainland Chinese students coming from a schooling system based on Confucian values and making the change in responding to an unfamiliar context of learning in a Western environment. Therefore, to address this issue and the difficulties accounting educators face in understanding Chinese students’ perceptions and how they learn, this study focuses on Mainland Chinese undergraduate accounting students’ views in two Australian universities. Mainland Chinese students are denoted as those who are of Chinese descent and whose parents are also of Chinese descent, having been born and lived in Mainland China for most of their lives. This study contributes to the accounting education
literature by examining the learning experience of these students and how they interact or respond to the new learning context. In particular, it is a study of how these students adapt (if any) their learning behaviours to the Australian education context. Numerous studies (as discussed in the following chapters) have suggested that the manner in which one approaches her/his learning is greatly influenced by the perceived learning context and hence it is crucial to take account of this aspect when examining the way students learn. The abovementioned studies conducted in the early 2000s on international students’ experiences and perceptions in a Western educational environment have all indicated student dissatisfaction (Hellsten, 2002; East, 2001; Sherry et al., 2004), hence this study seeks to explore whether Chinese accounting students’ perceptions differ from Australian students in dealing with the learning context as they undertake studies in Australia. The main model which underpins this study is Ramsden’s Student Learning in Context (see Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2). In particular, the study examines how students perceive teaching, the teacher/student relationship, assessment demands, workload, as well as using English as a medium of study and how they cope with the learning context in which they undertake their studies in Australia.

Ramsden’s (1979, 1981) work represents seminal research on the way students at tertiary level experience the effects of the learning context. His model of ‘student learning context’ (Ramsden, 1992; 2003), which is built on the work by Biggs, (1979) is widely known in the education literature. The model describes the possible connections between different aspects of learning and teaching as a result of a chain of causal sequence of events at different levels of generality. The seminal research by Ramsden on students’ learning context is discussed in Chapter 2. This study uses Ramsden’s model and extends it to account for students with a non-Western background studying in Australian universities, rather than students of an Anglo-Saxon background in a Western institution. Mainland Chinese students differ distinctly in educational and cultural background from the Anglo-Saxon group of students which Ramsden used to analyse data and thus the participants of this study may not fit the original model by Ramsden on how the context of learning affects their learning.
Therefore, this thesis seeks to understand Mainland Chinese students’ perceptions of the context of learning and its influence on their studies based on their experience in the Chinese educational system and the experience of the educational context as it evolves during their studies in Australian universities.

In short, this study expects to gain insights into: (1) Mainland Chinese students’ previous educational background in China and its influence on their learning in Australia; (2) their perceptions of and response to the learning context during their studies in Australia; and (3) the lessons that educators can learn to better service their Mainland Chinese accounting students. In this way, the study aims to contribute to the accounting education literature.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS
As noted above, this study is an investigation of the perceived learning context of students from Mainland China who are undertaking undergraduate degree level studies in accounting in similar programs at two Australian universities. The learning context may be viewed in terms of the nature of the course/program as well as the teaching within the course/program (English, Luckett and Mladenovic, 2004). Therefore, the learning context can include syllabi, past examination papers, teaching methods, teaching space, evaluation and feedback, and the helpfulness and friendliness of lecturers (Ramsden, 1992). This study will consider the perceived learning context of Mainland Chinese accounting students, as influenced by teaching, the teacher/student relationship, assessment, workload and English language. The research questions in this study are described in detail in Chapter 4. However, in this introductory chapter it is useful to list the research questions, which are as follows:

- How do Mainland Chinese students perceive the learning context in Australian universities, given their previous educational experience in Mainland China?

- How do Mainland Chinese students respond to the new learning context?
These questions consider students’ perceptions and experience of the learning context in Australian universities and the adjustments students make in response to their perceptions during their studies in Australia. The term ‘respond’ seeks to find out the manner in which students learn or what students consider appropriate ways of learning as a result of their perceptions. It aims to find out the adjustments (if any) students think they have to make as they experience the new learning context.

1.4 METHODOLOGY
A focus group approach to data collection is employed in this study as it enables and facilitates interaction among participants in an in-depth discussion of their perceptions of the educational experience, which otherwise would not be possible. The researcher was able to interview the sample group of Chinese students in their mother tongue, namely Mandarin. This adds to the richness and quality of the data gained and the analysis undertaken. The data was analysed once it was translated into the English language and transcribed and coded into common themes using NVivo, a qualitative software program called NVivo.

1.5 CHAPTER STRUCTURES
Chapter 2 examines student learning and more specifically, it looks at areas such as student approaches to learning, the conceptions of student learning and Bigg’s 3Ps model before introducing Ramsden’s model of ‘student learning context’, which forms the main research framework of this study. Examples of a range of learning context issues including teaching, the teacher/student relationship, assessment, workload and English language are discussed. It examines the importance of how students’ perceptions of the learning environment influence the way they learn. In Chapter 3, the literature review considers the impact of cultural issues on learning, with particular reference to Chinese culture and learning practices. This sets the scene in understanding how cultural background and previous educational experience affect the perception, attitude, behaviour and response of Mainland Chinese students, which is a key variable in Ramsden’s model. Chapter 4 discusses the research design and
methodology and Chapters 5, 6 and 7 describe, analyse and discuss the findings. In Chapter 8, the Summary and Conclusions chapter, the findings and contributions of the study are discussed, as are the limitations and possibilities for future research.
Chapter 2

STUDENT LEARNING AND THE LEARNING CONTEXT

This chapter explores the manner in which students learn, providing a crucial background in understanding the learning environment and the impact of students’ perceptions of the context of their learning. In particular, this chapter looks at students’ approaches to learning before focusing on the theoretical framework of the students’ learning context as developed by Ramsden. As mentioned earlier, the seminal work by Ramsden forms the basis for the research questions in this study.

2.1 STUDENT LEARNING

Jean Piaget, a psychologist who studied cognitive development in children argued that the construction of meaning or understanding is learning itself. According to McInerney and McInerney (2002), Piaget’s theory eventually led to the development of a learning theory known as ‘constructivism’. In Piaget’s cognitive theory, learning is seen to take place when the learner’s expectations are unmet, and they must address the discrepancy between what they expected with what they actually encountered. Thus learning is individually constructed; individuals literally construct themselves and their world by accommodating experiences (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996). Following this concept, it is the teacher’s role to cater for a student’s movement through the developmental stages with the provision of relevant experiences to enable active involvement in the learning process. Taking a step further, other philosophers and researchers claim that an individual’s learning is both cognitively and socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Guba and Lincoln, 2004). Cognitive constructivism is the manner in which an individual understands the meaning of things, in terms of her/his mental maturity or increasing capacity to understand and learn. Social constructivism refers to how individual learners construct knowledge or meaning within the learning context and/or social encounters with other individuals (such as teachers and peers). Constructivism can also be characterised as
supporting individuals to learn by doing. According to Jonassen (1996, p. 11), in practice constructivism involves ‘....the process of how learners construct knowledge. How learners construct knowledge depends on what they already know, which depends on the kinds of experiences they have had, how they have organised those experiences into knowledge structures, and the beliefs they use to interpret objects and events that they encounter in the world’. In other words, constructivists believe that learning is influenced by the context in which an idea is taught and by individuals’ previous beliefs and attitudes. Nevertheless, Piaget’s overemphasis upon individual development has subsequently caused him to overlook the importance of the social environment in learning (Williams and Burden, 2001). Further, the developmental stages which Piaget described cannot be generalized to different individuals and cultures (Bidell and Fischer, 1992; Gardner, 1983; Rogoff and Chavajay, 1995; Sutherland, 1992).

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, focused on an individual’s learning through socio-cultural experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky’s socio-cultural perspectives on the development of the mind have contributed greatly to education. His views have influenced later studies on the area of human intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985; Chen and Siegler, 2000) and on language learning (Lantolf, 2000). His socio-cultural theory, also referred to as social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), places the understanding of subjectivity and psychology of learning theories within a social, cultural, historical and societal context. While there are numerous branches of socio-cultural theory, the work of Vygotsky sets the base for this study. He viewed social interaction as a fundamental element in the process of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Basically, Vygotsky emphasised the links between individuals and the social cultural context in which they behave and interact in shared experiences (Crawford, 1996). As a social constructivist, Vygotsky focused on the learning context and hence stressed that students play an active role in their own learning, while teachers are facilitators who collaborate with students in helping them in the construction of meaning or knowledge. Besides promoting the view that individuals are socially constructed through interaction with their social and cultural environment, Vygotskian’s socio-
cultural theory also claims that language is significant in the understanding of meaning and subjectivity. These are the concepts that form the underlying assumptions to the work of Ramsden on student learning (discussed in section 2.6).

Student learning may be assessed in terms of both quality and quantity. However, Marton and Saljo (1976a) have pointed out that up until the late 1960’s, the emphasis on evaluating learning was merely placed on the quantitative aspects. They found that very little research concentrated on evaluating the qualitative aspects of learning. Biggs (1979) has observed that in the past, even when learning quality was evaluated, it has been highly subjective. In an attempt to provide a structure for evaluating the levels of learning quality, Bloom et al., (1956) introduced the ‘Learning outcomes and Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives’ (refer to Table 2.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Ability or Objective</th>
<th>Learning Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>To remember previously learned material</td>
<td>Definition or description of terms, facts and basic concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>To understand the meaning of material</td>
<td>Explanation or interpretation of facts or concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>To use learned material in new situations</td>
<td>Application or demonstration of rules, methods, concepts, principles, or theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>To break down material into its component parts and identify and analyse relevant relationships</td>
<td>Examination and discrimination of logical reasoning, organisational structure, assumptions and relevant data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>To creatively form new patterns of structures</td>
<td>Formulation or organisation of problem solving plans and written communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>To judge the value of material for a given purpose</td>
<td>Comparison and appraisal of material of logical consistency and relevance to a purpose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Bloom et al., 1956
However, Biggs (1979) has criticised the Bloom Taxonomy as not necessarily reflecting the psychogenesis of good learning, as it is often adopted in multiple-choice or structured questions and is less appropriate in evaluating open-ended questions. This notion is strongly supported by Marton and Saljo (1976a), Ford (1981), Entwistle, Hanley and Hounsell (1979), who concurred that up to that time (late 1960’s), most research merely used quantitative terms in evaluating learning outcomes. It is from the 1970’s onwards that educational research started to move towards qualitative rather than quantitative studies in understanding student learning. In order to facilitate good teaching and ensure quality in learning, educational studies are now also concerned with the research of context, or ‘student learning in its natural setting’ (Entwistle and Hounsell, 1979, p. 359). To better understand how students learn, it is useful to look into the approaches which students adopt in their learning and the interaction between students and their learning environment. Hence the following section begins with describing student approaches to learning.

2.2 STUDENT APPROACHES TO LEARNING

As discussed later in this chapter, the understanding of how students approach their learning is inextricably linked to their perceptions of the context of learning. According to Biggs (1995, p. 2), approaches to learning ‘refer to the ways in which students go about their academic tasks, thereby affecting the nature of the learning outcome’. It is also referred to as situation-specific tactics and strategies by which students engage in their learning (Honkimaki, Tynjala and Valkonen, 2004). Further, students may learn in a very different manner, depending on the context of their learning and their interpretation of the context. Biggs (1987a, p. 2) has noted that: ‘…students learn in the way they do because they construe their present situation in a way that determines their approach to the task; “learning” in order to meet set requirements with minimal effort will be qualitatively different from the “learning” done in order to compete for a special prize’.

In seminal studies by Marton and Saljo (1976a; 1976b) in the 1970s at the University of Gothenburg, qualitatively different levels of understanding were identified in higher
education students’ reading of study texts (Fransson, 1977; Svensson, 1977; Marton and Saljo, 1976b). The research by Marton and Saljo (1976a) focused on the differences in what is learned (learning being described in terms of its content), instead of how much is learned. It was discovered that different levels of outcome which hold different conceptions of the content of the learning task could be distinguished. The corresponding differences in the process of students learning, or more commonly known as student approaches to learning, were discussed. These qualitatively different approaches to learning were described as deep and surface approaches (Marton and Saljo, 1976b; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983).

Several instruments were also developed to measure students’ learning, such as, Entwistle’s Approaches to Studying Inventory (Entwistle and Waterson, 1988) and Biggs’ Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, 1987b). Subsequently, the pioneering works of Marton and Saljo were further developed by Entwistle in the research at the University of Lancaster. The findings at Lancaster extended the definitions of deep and surface approaches to learning, so they could be applied to a student’s work on various academic tasks in their natural setting. In addition, a third strategic approach was also introduced in the research at Lancaster (Ramsden, 1979; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). The meaning of deep, surface and strategic approaches to learning is discussed as follows.

2.2.1 Deep, Surface and Strategic approaches

The deep approach to learning is defined as an intention to seek understanding and the meaning or message underlying the learning materials (Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse, 1983). Students who adopt a deep approach to learning generally have an intrinsic interest in their study and often derive enjoyment from their study. Therefore, these students are more likely to employ strategies that enable them to relate ideas to their personal experience, distinguish evidence from argument, identify patterns and principles, form hypotheses and have the ability to relate what they have learned to other subjects or to topics within the subjects (Entwistle, 1987). Thus, the adoption of a deep approach to learning would seemingly lead to higher quality learning outcomes.
As such, educators have been most interested in simulating such an approach of learning in their students.

In contrast, the *surface approach* to learning focuses on memorising and reproducing what is thought to be required by the lecturer. In other words, it is characterised by a focus on the learning material itself (Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse, 1993). This approach has also been referred to by Svensson (1979) as an atomistic approach. Students who use this approach to learning are extrinsically motivated and view learning as externally imposed with the aim of mainly passing examinations (Honkimaki, Tynjala and Valkonen, 2004). The strategies that these students employ will generally concentrate on factual acquisition and rote memorisation. They fail to examine the logic of an argument and are unable to integrate disconnected pieces of information into any coherent structure. Therefore, utilising approaches that are characterised as surface would lead to poorer quality learning outcomes.

The third approach to learning introduced in the study at Lancaster is called the *strategic approach* to learning, the best possible way to success (Honkimaki, Tynjala and Valkonen, 2004). For example, a simultaneous adoption of deep plus strategic approaches or surface plus strategic approaches is when students search for meaning in a highly organised way in the former approaches, or rote learn in a highly organised way in the latter (Booth, Luckett and Mladenovic, 1999). This strategic approach is also known as the *achieving approach*, which is based on competition and ego enhancement (Wilding and Andrews, 2006; Booth, Luckett and Mladenovic, 1999). This approach is generally adopted when the intention is to achieve the highest possible grades, by way of a systematic management of time, effort and study conditions, not to mention the studying of previous exam papers etc. (Entwistle, 1987), rather than focusing on understanding (Case and Gunstone, 2003). It also involves ‘setting aside work within certain courses to concentrate on imminent tasks’ (Scheja, 2006, p. 430), students’ self-regulation of their learning and awareness of learning in its context (Entwistle and Peterson, 2004). In short, students adopting such an approach would organise their learning strategically in order to achieve academically.
According to Entwistle et al., (2004), the strategic approach to studying can be further divided into three sub-categories, namely, monitoring studies, organisation and time management, and the effort and concentration on studying. In addition, it is suggested that this approach differs from the deep and surface approaches. The deep and surface approaches ‘…describe ways in which students engage in the context of the task itself, while the achieving strategy describes the ways in which students organise the temporal and spatial contexts surrounding the task’ (Biggs, 1987a, p. 12). Therefore, depending on the circumstances, students may switch strategies between deep and surface in order to obtain good results.

Table 2.2 below provides a summary of the defining features of the difference in approaches to learning as discussed earlier. The deep approach is defined by an intention to seek understanding, while the surface approach reproduces what seems to be required by the lecturers by memorising materials needed for assessments. The strategic approach aims to achieve the highest possible academic performance by effective study organisation and using past examination papers to predict questions. In order to indicate whether the learning and teaching context encourages a deep approach to learning and if the assessment structure rewards a deep approach, the Biggs Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) (Biggs, 1987b) has been widely adopted for that purpose.
Table 2.2  Defining features of Approaches to Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEEP APPROACH</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intention to understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vigorous interaction with content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relate new ideas to previous knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relate concepts to everyday experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relate evidence to conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine the logic of the argument</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SURFACE APPROACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intention to complete task requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorise information needed for assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to distinguish principles from examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treat tasks as an external imposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on discrete elements without integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreflectiveness about purpose or strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGIC APPROACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intention to obtain highest possible grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organise time and distribute effort to greatest effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure conditions and materials for studying appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use previous exam papers to predict questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be alert to cues about marking schemes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Entwistle 1987, page. 16

As observed by Gow, Kember and Cooper (1994), what students learn is related to the approach that they adopt. There is also a possibility that students adopt mixed approaches to their learning (Beattie, Collins and McInnes, 1997). It was also found that the same students could adopt a surface approach in some contexts and a deep approach in others, which is referred to as the ‘context-dependent nature’ of approaches to learning (Ramsden, 1992). Accordingly, the different approaches that students adopt in their learning are largely dependent on their perception of, and response to, the learning context within which learning and teaching takes place (Lucas and Mladenovic, 2004), as well as students’ motive for and conceptions of learning. As such, students do not simply remain as deep learners or surface learners. Therefore, the learning and teaching context may well be altered in a manner that improves the learning quality (Lucas, 2001) of students by encouraging them to use
deep learning approaches. As such, various studies (Biggs, 2003; Trigwell and Prosser, 1993) have attempted to identify features of educational context that are related to deep or surface approaches to learning. The work of Gibbs (1992), Kember et al., (1997) and Nijhuis et al., (2005) have made recommendations to redesign the learning environment in an attempt to simulate deep learning approaches in students. The notion is strongly supported by the work of Hall et al., (2004), which found a statistically significant increase in a deep learning approach and a decrease in the surface approach in their accounting students when the learning environment was modified.

2.2.2 Different learning approaches in different disciplines

The different emphasis in learning approaches may also be related to different disciplines. This is evidenced in the literature by Ramsden (1984), Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) and Biggs (1987a). In their Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) research; Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) found a clear contrast in experience between the arts and sciences. This notion is also strongly supported by Jackling (2005b). As explained by Jackling (2005b, p. 600) ‘...students' descriptions of learning approaches in science subjects have tended to identify hierarchical order, rules and procedure, suggesting a greater emphasis on surface approaches to learning. In contrast, students have perceived arts and social science tasks as requiring interpretation, comparison and generalisation, more closely aligned with a deep approach to learning.’

It has also been pointed out by Lonka and Lindblom-Ylanne (1996) that given the nature of accounting and its assessment regime where the emphasis is on closed-book examinations, surface learning is encouraged, reproducing conceptions of learning compared with other subject areas (students’ conceptions of learning is discussed later in the chapter). A similar finding was evident in the study by Byrne and Flood (2004), who found reproductive conceptions more commonly expressed than conceptions of learning which centre on understanding among undergraduate and postgraduate accounting students at an Irish university. The issue raised by Lonka
and Lindblom-Ylanne is further reinforced by the studies of Gow, Kember and Cooper (1994) and Booth, Luckett and Mladenovic (1999), that accounting students tend to exhibit relatively higher scores on the surface approach and lower scores on deep approach when compared with students in other disciplines. In the study by Gow, Kember and Cooper (1994), it was found that students’ enthusiasm and the employment of a deep approach to learning declined from the first to the second year of the accounting course. In addition, it was reported that although the average scores on the deep approach rose again through the second and third years, it remained below the first year level. Beattie, Collins and McInnesl (1997) concurred with the findings and asserted that the accounting discipline attracts students who predominantly tend to use a surface approach to learning. Therefore, there are concerns over the quality of accounting education and ways in which to promote a deep approach to learning in the accounting discipline.

In a phenomenographic study carried out by Lucas (2001), it was found that seven out of ten students interviewed on their experiences of learning in the first year introductory accounting module had the intention of just passing the accounting subject. The research suggested that students’ intentions in studies are specifically related to their approach to learning. Those students who merely intended to pass the subject were found to have adopted a particular form of surface approach in their learning called a ‘format’ approach. The format approach was derived by the way students placed an emphasis on the format of the financial statements in accounting, instead of focusing on any inherent meaning. In the study, three key features of format approach were discussed (Lucas, 2001, p. 169).
1. Students do not see a need to think about the subject.

This feature of the approaches taken was that students felt that there was no need to think about the subject, nor make sense of the subject as a whole. As some students expressed it;

‘...I managed to get away with it just regurgitating the stuff that you’ve got in your short term memory, there was no need to really think about it and be able to put unto new concepts and look at it in different ways...’

‘...as long as I knew how the workings were accomplished I didn’t bother going into the reasoning and stuff, I just needed to know, that’s OK...’

2. Students seek to ‘fit things in’.

The second feature was that students viewed learning accounting as a task of fitting things in and hence students concentrated on learning where things are fitted rather than understanding why they are fitted. As such, learning accounting becomes a matter of mechanically learning the format.

‘...basically a lot of practice. I didn’t so much grasp the concepts, because I basically just did it over and over and over again, and I learnt where each thing fitted in...’

3. The balance sheet is seen as a process.

The final feature of the format approach related to the way in which students viewed the financial statements, predominantly in terms of format and how the statements are assembled.
In the Lucas study, only three students of the ten who participated took the approach that extends beyond mastering a technique or format and related what they learned in accounting to their personal relevancies. Lucas (2001) also pointed out that the majority of the students interviewed had a preconception that accounting was about numbers, mathematics and techniques. This preconception is a vital contextual factor that predisposes the students to taking the format approach in learning accounting. More recently, researchers such as Abhayawansa and Fonsecam (2010) who conducted a phenomenographic study on overseas accounting students have further reiterated that learning conceptions and approaches are strongly influenced by students’ preconceptions. It is found in the study that the participants who view accounting as a vocation and a discipline which is predominantly embedded in practice have lower order conceptions of learning and display characteristics of a surface learning approach. Hence, the approach students adopt in their learning is also strongly influenced by how they conceive of the learning itself. It is also argued that students’ conceptions of learning could develop over time, such that students who progress through a degree program tend to become increasingly sophisticated in their conceptions of learning (Entwistle, 1990, cited in Coffield et al., 2004) and their learning approaches. Further, in a study conducted on Australian undergraduate accounting students, it was reported that majority of the participants possessed a lower order conceptions of learning as the students took an instrumental view to learning accounting (Lord and Robertson, 2006). More specifically, the participants perceived the responsibility of learning to be that of the instructors’ rather than their own. Students’ conceptions of learning is described and evaluated in section 2.4 later.

2.2.3 Impact of situational and related factors on students’ learning

Further to the studies by Biggs (1987a) on situational factors, Case and Marshall (2004) found that a student’s approach to learning is to some degree determined by her/his past learning experience. Another major determinant of the approach that students adopt in their learning is the nature of the course as perceived by the student themselves. This is in agreement with the study by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983). The later study by Lucas and Mladenovic (2004) found that the approaches to
learning research has concentrated more on personal factors (such as motivation) and contextual elements (such as curriculum design, course culture and assessment tasks) and their relationship on how students choose or avoid a particular learning approach. They further observed that an approach to learning is a student’s response to a context and, accordingly, that response may vary as it depends on the student’s perception of the context.

A study carried out by Jackling (2005b), found evidence that there were significant changes in students’ approaches to learning over the duration of an undergraduate course. Further, in prior studies it has been reported that there was a decline in deep and achieving approaches to learning over the duration of a university course (Gow, Kember and Cooper, 1994). However, the findings on the direction of change in learning approaches by Jackling differ from those from prior studies (Watkins and Hattie, 1981; Volet, 1994; Zeegers, 2001) and therefore the difference in direction of change might be specific to different disciplines (Meyer and Parsons, 1989).

The study by Jackling (2005a) relied on undergraduate accounting students as the sample and in one instance, the drop in deep approaches to learning was attributed to students responding to the learning environment by reproducing what they perceived the assessor wanted, or was likely to accept (Svensson, 1997), while on other occasions, the drop in deep approaches to learning was attributed to the perceived learning environment, namely the quality of teaching and perceptions of workload (Gow and Kember, 1990; Gow, Kember and Cooper, 1994; Zeegers, 2001). In her study, Jackling (2005a, p. 274) confirms that ‘….elements of the learning environment under the educator’s control positively influence the way students approach their studies in accounting’. Further, studies by Busato et al., (1998) and Vermetten (1999) indicated that an improved teaching/learning environment over the study period will contribute to improving the quality of learning strategies.

Ramsden (2003) suggested that if educational contexts are designed based on features that would relate to deep approaches, it is likely that all or most students
would adopt deep approaches, resulting in higher quality learning outcomes. Similar conclusions were observed in the work of Prosser and Trigwell (1999) and Biggs (2003). However, more recently, the work of Balasooriya et al., (2009) seems to challenge these findings. Their study indicates that not all students’ approaches to learning are context-dependent. Some may even be completely opposite to the effect predicted by the theories and others may give rise to approaches not predicted by the theories. Nevertheless, the authors noted that further research is warranted to confirm their findings and investigate how the new understanding can assist to maximise the benefits of designing a deep-enhancing educational context.

2.3 LEARNING STYLE
Unlike approaches to learning, a person’s learning style, which is the learner’s characteristic style of acquiring and using information in learning is not context dependent; in fact it is believed to reflect inherent, relatively fixed preference of individuals. A combination of numerous variables of students’ learning, namely, conceptions of learning, motivational orientation and regulation of learning is also commonly referred to as learning styles (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Lonka, 1997; Vermunt, 1998; Makinen et al., 2004). In most accounting education research, a student’s learning style is captured with the use of Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory (LSI) (Stout and Ruble, 1994). Based on Kolb’s (1985) Learning Style Inventory, Honey and Mumford (2000) further developed a Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ) which identified students’ learning style preferences as Activist, Reflector, Theorist or Pragmatist. The characteristics of the learning style preferences are described below;

- Activist prefers challenges and new experiences, involvement with others, such as problem solving, new knowledge, small group discussion.
- Reflector prefers to learn from activities that give them time to watch, think and review what has happened, such as using journals, brainstorming, providing expert explanations and analysis.
Theorist prefers to think problems through steps, such as lectures, systems, models, readings.

Pragmatist prefers to apply new learning to actual practice to see if they work, such as laboratories, observations, field work.

The study by Barron (2004) on Chinese students’ learning experiences and their preferred learning styles in Australian tertiary education indicates that the majority of Chinese students are reflectors, and some are theorists. Very few Chinese students are pragmatists and activists. This is in contrast to students with a non-Chinese background, where there are more activists than the rest, and reflectors are the least common. This finding indicates major learning issues and problems when the Chinese students move to Australia for their tertiary education.

2.4 EVALUATING CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING

This section explores the different levels of learning in terms of what students construe of the framework of the specific materials to be learned. The initial conceptions of learning identified by Saljo (1979) were further developed by Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty (1993), who added the sixth conception to the existing five means of learning. The conception relates to students’ conceptions of understanding and viewing something in a different manner. The six categories of conceptions of learning are identified as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Increasing one’s knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Memorising and reproducing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Applying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Seeing something in a different way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Changing as a person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These six categories can be seen as having a hierarchy from least to most sophisticated, with 1 to 3 representing essentially a quantitative view of learning, while
4 to 6 focus on what may be viewed as qualitative (Watkins and Biggs, 2001). Drawing on Marton and Saljo’s (1976b) ideas of deep and surface approaches to learning, students’ conceptions of learning were reduced to just two levels by van Rossum and Schenk (1984), called constructive or deep approach (category 4 to 6) and reproducing or surface approach (category 1 to 3). Entwistle also argued that students who hold more sophisticated conceptions of learning are more likely to adopt a deep approach in their learning, while students who view learning as memorising or acquiring facts tend to adopt a surface approach. According to Marton et al., (1996, p. 70) ‘...conceptions 4 to 6 are concerned with the constitution of meaning, while 1 to 3 do not have this emphasis. Conceptions 4 to 6 are closely related to understanding with 1 to 3 less so’. In other words, category 4 to 6 (or the deep approach level) describe learning as an active process in which the learner is more independent in seeking their own understanding of the materials while category 1 to 3 (surface approach level) described learning to be a passive process where the learner is less independent in their learning. Category 1 to 3 is also said to be external to the learner, while category 4 to 6 to be internal where it focuses on the personal aspect of learning (Lord and Robertson, 2006).

Students who hold relatively superficial conceptions of learning (such as 1 to 3) are likely to utilise surface learning strategies and produce relatively poor learning outcomes (Watkins, 2004; 1996). Conception 2 is restricted to a memorisation kind of learning, which one might expect a high incidence of among Chinese learners (Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse, 1996). However, as Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse (1996) argue, all the pieces of knowledge that are remembered or memorised from conception 1 to 4 seem to make up understanding. A research instrument called Reflections on Learning Inventory (RoLI) has been further developed by Meyer and Boulton• Lewis (1999) to operationalise students’ conceptions of learning. According to Meyer and Boulton• Lewis (1999, p. 292), ‘the domain of the inventory is conceptually divided into four sections: (a) knowledge of learning—how students know that they have learned something; (b) experiences of learning—how students feel when they are learning; (c) influences on learning—factors that have caused
students’ learning to develop as it has; and (d) conceptions of learning—students’ beliefs about learning generally’.

Ramsden (1992) argued that tertiary educators should play a major role in helping their students become aware of their own current conceptions of learning. He further commented that this involves encouraging students to become actively engaged with their subject matter. Watkins (2004) concurred and added that it is a vital step in students utilising deep approaches to learning to achieve high quality learning outcomes. To achieve this, Ramsden (1992) recommends that educators need ‘to become scholars of their own students’ learning’.

A phenomenographic approach is commonly used in the research on conceptions of learning (Säljö, 1979; Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty, 1993). A study by Marton, Watkins and Tang (1997) using a phenomenographic approach, found that a number of Chinese senior secondary schools students in Hong Kong had such sophisticated conceptions of learning, that a much more elaborated model of learning was needed to capture their views, than had been found necessary in previous Western research.

According to Marton (1986), phenomenography is a scientific study that seeks to identify ways in which phenomena, or aspects of phenomena, are understood or appear to people. He strongly argues that studies of student learning should be looked at from the learner’s perspective, not from that of the researcher. Moreover, as noted by Lucas (2001), the focus of this research method is on experience that has been reflected on, to the degree that the experience can be explained, described and discussed by the person who experienced the learning. As Fyrenius et al., (2007) reiterate, the idea of the difference in approaches to learning, such as deep and surface emanates from the tradition of phenomenographic studies of learning. The authors have also used such a study in their investigation on medical students’ approaches to learning in Sweden.
Lucas (2001) has pointed out that there has been a limited use of phenomenography research in the area of accounting and she is one of the few researchers who have employed a phenomenographic study in the context of accounting. The study by Lucas was related to Saljo’s (1979) generalised conceptions of learning in categorising students’ responses. Subsequently Lord and Robertson (2006) adopted the phenomenographic approach in their investigation of the relationship between accountancy students’ conception and approach to learning, as well as students’ perception of lectures and tutorials. In this study, it was found that students who conceive learning as understanding will tend to value both didactic and interactive teaching approaches.

On the other hand, students who thought of learning as simply acquiring knowledge and reproducing it in assessments are less able to appreciate discussion-based classes or modelling of critical thinking offered by lecturers. Nonetheless, only a minority of the students who participated in a study by Lord and Robertson (2006) conceived seeking understanding as an outcome of their learning, while most students approach their learning in a surface way in response to the assessment requirement. Such findings are consistent with the work of Purdie and Hattie (2002), who noted that there are two fundamentally different ways in which Western university students’ conceive learning, namely a constructive learning conception and a reproductive learning conception. Students with the former learning conception would generally equate learning as seeking understanding and are responsible for their learning outcomes.

On the contrary, students with the latter conception would equate learning with memorising knowledge and are less responsible for their learning and instead would shift the greater part of the responsibility to their teachers (Devlin, 2002). Studies such as Vermunt (2005), Entwistle and McCune (2004) and Purdie and Hattie (2002) have observed that a constructive learning conception is connected with a self-regulated and deep learning strategy, while a reproductive learning conception is associated with an externally regulated and surface strategy. However, it was observed in the
work by Nijhuis et al., (2007) that self-regulated or independent learning appears to be positively related to both deep and surface learning strategies.

When a phenomenographic approach was adopted in other disciplines with Hong Kong secondary school students, it was found that a number of senior students had sophisticated qualitative conceptions of learning. They were able to explain how their approach to learning via repetition and memorisation actually improved their understanding of the material they were studying (Dahlin and Watkins, 2000). Research by Wong and Wen (2001) also supported the above findings on Chinese learners in Hong Kong. However, most of these studies have focused on Chinese learners in Hong Kong and arguably such studies are not necessarily representative of Mainland Chinese learners studying in Western universities in places such as Australia.

More recently, a phenomenographic study was conducted by Abhayawansa and Fonsecam (2010) on a group of Sri Lankan accounting students studying in Australia, and the results indicate that the participants’ prior learning experience and cultural background influence the formation of lower-order conceptions of learning. It was also observed in the study that the participants’ previous educational experience and cultural background contributed to their choice of surface approaches to learning. Students’ cultural and educational background is discussed in the following chapter.

Further, it is pointed out that students’ conception of learning and study orientation are influenced by their interpretation of previous learning experiences and their perception and interpretation of the current learning context (Honkimaki, Tynjala and Valkonen, 2004). In other words, if one has only experienced teaching in a didactic or teacher-centred manner, her or his conception of learning will most likely be in the knowledge transmission and reproduction stage. On the other hand, if one has had the experience in learning which seeks to enhance critical thinking, application and deep understanding, a more qualitative conception of learning may be expected. It is suggested that one’s conceptions of learning, as well as study orientations, could
ultimately determine the way one regulates her/his own learning (Honkimaki, Tynjala and Valkonen, 2004).

One could either be self-regulated, externally regulated or even have an overall of lack of regulation in her/his learning. Vermunt and Vermetten (2004, p. 362) define self-regulated learning as a way ‘….in which students perform most regulation activities themselves’ in contrast to externally regulated learning, where ‘….students let their learning processes be regulated by teachers, books etc’. As Torrano and Gonzalez Torres (2004) echoed, students who regulate their learning regard themselves as agents of their own behaviour and take learning as a proactive process, are self-motivated and use strategies that allow them to reach their desired academic outcomes. In agreement, other researchers such as Pintrich (2000) and Zimmerman (2000) conclude self-regulated learning to involve cognitive, motivational, affective and contextual factors.

2.5 THE PRESAGE-PROCESS-PRODUCT (3Ps) MODEL BY BIGGS

Drawing on the constructivist paradigm, learning is regarded as a personal, reflective and transformative process in which ideas, experiences and perceptions are integrated and something new is then created (Sandholtz et al., 1996). This concept is supported in the studies by Biggs who emphasise that learning/knowledge is defined/constructed by the student herself/himself and not by the teachers, nor by the teacher’s direct instruction (Biggs, 2003). With these notions, Biggs (1979) has developed the 3Ps model of learning, which was first outlined by Dunkin and Biddle (1974) to describe ‘the interactive relationship among students’ factors, teaching context, the on-going approaches to a particular task and student learning outcomes’ (Biggs, 2001, p. 135). According to Biggs (1987a) there are three distinct stages in the General Model of Student Learning, namely presage, process and product. Figure 2.1 below explains the relationship between the teaching/learning context, learning processes and learning outcomes in Biggs’ 3Ps learning model, which attempts to conceptualise student’s learning (Biggs, 1985, p. 185; 1987a).
Figure 2.1 Biggs’ General Model of Student Learning

As Biggs et al., (2001, p. 135) described, ‘presage factors refer to what exists, prior to engagement, that affects learning’. There are two broad environmental factors within the presage component. They are factors that exist before students enter the learning situation, the personal and situational (usually institutional), as outlined in Figure 2.1 above. Personal factors (known also as ‘student presage/context’) such as a particular IQ, abilities, values and attitudes that are derived from one’s home background and culture, as well as personality characteristics, can affect one’s approaches to learning. The same applies to situational factors (known also as ‘teaching presage/context’). Examples of situational factors include the amount of time
spent on a task, the difficulty of the task, teaching methods and assessment, teaching competency, course structure and design, curriculum content and conceptions of teaching and learning, classroom atmosphere, etc. (Biggs, 1987a). These two presage factors may either directly or indirectly affect students’ academic performance (product factor) through their influence on the process factor.

The process factor, also known as students’ approaches to learning, refers to the cognitive processes applied for learning activities (active or passive learning approach), is made up of both a motive and an appropriate strategy (Biggs, 1987a). As mentioned, the approach that a student adopts in learning will influence her/his performance and ultimately success or failure in examinations. It looks at the way students actually handle the task. Students who are intrinsically motivated seek meaning in their learning, read widely and connect new understanding with previous knowledge. Students who are motivated to get the highest grades, organise their studies effectively. On the other hand, those students who merely aim to meet the basic requirements of learning would reproduce the bare essentials accordingly. Therefore, the approach which students adopt in their learning could be deep, achieving (known also as strategic) or surface (Biggs, 1987b). This is illustrated in Table 2.3 below.

### Table 2.3 Motive and Strategy in approaches to learning and studying

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SA: Surface</td>
<td>Surface Motive (SM) is instrumental: main purpose is to meet requirements minimally; a balance between working too hard and failing.</td>
<td>Surface Strategy (SS) is reproductive: limit target to bare essentials and reproduce through rote learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DA: Deep</td>
<td>Deep Motive (DM) is intrinsic: study to actualise interest and competence in particular academic subjects.</td>
<td>Deep Strategy (DS) is meaningful: read widely, inter-relate with previous relevant knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA: Achieving</td>
<td>Achieving Motive (AM) is based on competition and ego-enhancement: obtain highest grades, whether or not material is interesting.</td>
<td>Achieving Strategy (AS) is based on organising one’s time and working space: behave as ‘model student’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Biggs, 1987b, page. 11*
The 3Ps model demonstrates that the product, which is the quality of student learning or performance, is influenced by the process of learning or approach that students adopt in their learning. Generally, if a student adopts a surface or low level approach, it will lead to a low level outcome, since only the bare essentials are learned and minimal requirements met. An achieving approach, (example of the model student who works hard to get the highest grades), will lead to an achieving level outcome, whilst a deep or high level approach corresponds to a deep or high level outcome. In addition, unlike surface and deep strategies which show the manner in which students engage in the actual learning task itself, the achieving strategy describes the manner in which a student organises her/his time and space in carrying out the learning task. Therefore, it is possible that students combine an achieving approach with either a deep or surface approach. For example, a student may seek meaning in learning and aim to achieve the highest grades in an organised and systematic way and hence, lead to a deep-achieving outcome. Alternatively, a student may want to obtain the highest grades by rote learning in an organised and systematic way (see Figure 2.1 above).

This 3P model forms a system in equilibrium. According to Biggs (1996b), a change to any component will either lead to changes throughout, or will create a new equilibrium and a new system, or in a situation where the changed component is absorbed, the system will revert to the status quo. Prior to the work by Marton and Saljo, researchers had paid very little focus to examining how students learn, or the process of student learning. As a result, little was known about the effects of the learning context such as the teaching, assessment demands and course organisation on students learning (Entwistle and Rasmden, 1983). Therefore, building on Biggs’ 3Ps model discussed earlier, Ramsden (1992) further developed a model called the ‘Student Learning in Context’, to ‘demonstrate how the student’s intention (to understand or to reproduce) interacted with the process of studying and how these processes and intentions were reflected in the quality of understanding reached’ (p.
As this study investigates the learning experiences and views of students, its focus is on the presage component, more precisely, situational factor.

### 2.6 SEMINAL RESEARCH BY RAMSDEN

The seminal studies by Ramsden (1981; 1979) were conducted on Anglo-Saxon students in English universities, in examining how students experience the effects of the learning context. More specifically, Ramsden considered how students’ perceptions of teaching, assessment, course content and structure within the natural setting of academic departments, influence the way students learn. Therefore, the focus is not on the framework of courses and assessment itself, but rather on what the students construct out of this framework. In other words, Ramsden emphasised that it is the students’ response to their views of the teaching environment that is important, and as such may not necessarily be the same as the educators perceive it.

The concept by Vygotsky (1987) that knowledge or learning is socially enacted is embedded in the work of Ramsden. There is also an underpinning assumption in which life-worlds frames one’s experience. The 'life-world' refers to the way in which individuals live their lives and how, through their experience of living in society, they acquire views and perspectives on the world with which they develop attitudes that influence their actions and behaviours. Included in this acquisition are cultural knowledge and language forms that are shared with other members of society or one's social group. This information assists individuals to deal with specific situations and forms their perceptions and understandings of the world. As this study centres on Chinese student’s perceptions of the learning environment in Australia, it is essential to understanding the cultural and educational aspects of their life-world back in Mainland China. This is discussed in Chapter 3.

Using a model called ‘Learning in Context’ (Figure 2.2), which is built on Biggs' 3Ps (Figure 2.1) model (1979) introduced earlier in the chapter, Ramsden explains the possible connections between different aspects of learning and teaching. The model looks at a chain of relations at different levels of generality rather than a single causal
sequence of events. As noted by Duff and McKinstry (2007, p. 187), who have recently combined Biggs's 3Ps model with Ramsden's model, the 'important implication of the 3Ps model is its emphasis on the context of student learning and of students perceptions of the academic task'. Therefore, using Ramsden's model (2003; 1992), this study explores Mainland Chinese undergraduate accounting students’ perceptions of the learning context in Australian universities. The following section will discuss each of the variables in Ramsden's model as represented in Figure 2.2 in the following order: learning outcomes; approach to learning; perception of task requirements; context of learning; orientation to studying; and previous educational experience.

**Figure 2.2 Student Learning in Context Model**

![Student Learning in Context Model Diagram]

Presage  
Process  
Product  

*Source: Adapted from Ramsden, 2003, page. 82*
2.6.1 Learning outcomes

Through the model (Figure 2.2), Ramsden pointed out that students’ learning outcomes are influenced by the students’ approach to learning. Various studies (Ramsden, 1981; Prosser, 2000 and Lizzio et al., 2002) have found that students who consistently adopt deep approaches, which are facilitated by the perception of good teaching, clear goals and appropriate assessment, have proven to perform better academically. Biggs (1996b) has observed that Asian learners have achieved high scores in international studies and that they are able to excel in Western countries. Similarly, numerous studies (Lee, 1996; Cheng, 1994; Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse, 1993; Stevenson, 1992) also draw the conclusion that Chinese students generally outperform their Western counterparts. However, these academic achievements are usually expressed in a raw score in a closed-book examination or other assessment. Duff (2004) argues that emphasis should be on the ‘quality of learning’, not just how well one is able to regurgitate the knowledge from the information provided by the educator. Westerners might not outperform Chinese academically but in general, they are arguably more well-rounded in their education and ultimately more employable. This is due to the fact that Western students focus on reaching one’s full potential; they are more learner active; the emphasis is understanding, application and ability; and social aspects are not ignored (Yee, 1989). Therefore, academic performance should not be overemphasised; instead a focus in developing students’ learning competencies is essential.

2.6.2 Approach to learning

Approach to learning, also known as the process stage in Biggs’ Presage-Process-Product (3Ps) model, refers to the manner in which students learn. The notion of how a student’s learning approach has impacts on study outcomes, is also evidenced in a number of studies (Booth et al., 1999; Gow, Kember and Cooper, 1994; Watkins and Hattie, 1981). As discussed earlier in the chapter, the approach that students adopt in their learning ranges from deep, strategic to surface. Ramsden also observed that students undertake different approaches to different tasks: more precisely the same student takes different approaches in different circumstances. Further, due to the
inevitable gap between educators' intentions and students' perceptions of the teaching environment or learning context, it is impossible to instruct students in using deep approaches in their learning (Ramsden, 2003; 1992) as evident in the experiments by Ramsden et al., (1986) and Marton and Saljo (1984). The attempts to train first year students in adopting a more effective learning approach had turned out to be futile and resulted in students using surface approaches instead, which were the reverse of those which the educators intended, as students view things in a different light (Ramsden, et al., 1986). Approaches to learning are determined predominantly by students' own perception of the learning context is also observed by Volet and Renshaw (1996) and Entwistle, McCune and Hounsell (2002). In other words, one’s approach to learning is flexible and adaptable and is highly responsive towards one’s perceptions. Further, Gow, Kember and Cooper (1994) found evidence that the approach adopted by students in an accounting degree program was strongly influenced by the learning context and environment. This notion is also asserted by Ramsden (2003; 1992; 1984; 1981) who explained that students' approaches to learning depend on their interest in the task and their previous experience of the area to which it relates. In turn, these influences are themselves associated with their perceptions of how the work will be assessed and with the degree of choice over content and method of learning available to the student.

As this study focuses on Mainland Chinese students, it is worth understanding some of the misconceptions of the approach that they adopt in their learning. Therefore, the following sections will look at the myth of rote learning and memorisation in learning which are commonly connected to Chinese learners.

2.6.2.1 The myth of rote learning

Generally, there are two goal orientations that students adopt in learning: task focused and performance focused. Shi et al., (2001) found that students who adopt the former goal are more focused on improving their understanding and increasing their competency when learning, while students who adopt the latter goal are more interested with grades and concerned with outperforming others to prove their
competency and superiority. A higher personal performance goal orientation is reported when students perceive that the school environment focuses on performance. Students who adopt a personal goal of learning and understanding in the school are students who perceive that the school environment focuses on the importance of learning and understanding. Further, according to Dweck and Leggett (1988), while a performance focus can promote rote and superficial learning, a task focus leads to a willingness to engage in meaningful learning and working hard. According to Hess, Chang and McDevitt, (1987), Chinese students have learning goals that exhibit a task focus. However, Western researchers often perceive Chinese students in particular to rote learn or adopt a surface approach in their learning (Biggs, 1996a; Volet and Renshaw, 1996; Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse, 1993), an approach resulting from their previous educational experience in China.

The general misconceptions that Chinese students rote learn (defined by the Macquarie Dictionary as ‘learning in a mechanical way without thought or meaning’) or adopt a surface approach in their learning, have been much discussed and debated in recent years, as more and more researchers have considered cultural aspects of learning. Some Western educators perceive that Chinese students are more rigid in thought, less proactive and less original compared to their Western counterparts. In a study carried out by Stevenson and Stigler (1992), it was found that Chinese students lack creativity, but at the elementary level they continuously perform better in mathematics than US students. In fact, it has been said that the Chinese students adopt a more sophisticated strategy in their learning, where ‘….Chinese grade one students behave more like US grade five students in their preference for a decomposition strategy rather than counting’ (Biggs, 1996a, p. 48). This decomposition strategy, according to Geary, Liu and Bow Thomas (1992, p. 183), requires a ‘….solid conceptual understanding of addition and number sets’ where such achievements are not possible through rote learning. As pointed out by Biggs (1996), numerous studies have provided evidence that not only at elementary level but also at secondary and tertiary level, Chinese students have a stronger preference for high level, meaning-based learning strategies and avoidance of rote learning.
approach than their Western counterparts. This is contrary to the general misconception that Chinese students rote learn.

According to a study of Chinese accounting students in Hong Kong by Gow, Kember and Cooper (1994), students adopting a surface approach tended toward accurate reproduction and syllabus-bound in study strategies, without understanding. Their motivations were to obtain paper qualifications and for some, the fear of failure in tests. On the other hand, students who adopted a deep approach were generally motivated by intrinsic motivation or interest in the subject for its own sake; these students sought the real meaning of the subject. This often cited study supports the stereotype of the Chinese learner but was arguably influenced by the learning context prevailing at the educational institution at the time. Although published in 1994, the data was collected in 1988 prior to the introduction of the first accounting degree in Hong Kong, which was a move away from the professionally-based, syllabus-bound courses then being offered.

The overemphasis on examinations by the Chinese students has been criticised by educators as promoting rote learning or surface learning (Leung, 1998). However, as Lee (1996) observed, in Confucian teaching on education, self-cultivation and self-realisation are intrinsic values which by nature are inclined towards a deep rather than surface approach to learning. Cooper (2004) found in a study of Chinese accounting students that while surface approaches to learning can be associated with rote learning, the Chinese tradition of memorisation through repetition can be used to deepen understanding and achieve high levels of academic performance. Repetition is practised by Chinese learners to ensure accurate recall of information (Chan, 1999). In her study, the Chinese students claimed that they adopted repetitive learning once they have understood the materials, so that they were better able to remember the information during examinations. Watkins and Biggs (2001) also found that Chinese students learn through repetition in order to ensure retention of materials learned and to enhance understanding. Unlike the Westerners’ view that memorisation can impede critical understanding and hence the development of constructivist
approaches to learning, repetitive learning actually leads to a deep understanding through the process of memorisation. As Marton et al., (1996, p. 81) clarified ‘….when a text is memorised, it can be repeated in a way that deepens understanding where different aspects of the text are focused on with each repetition.’ As noted by Marton et al., (2005), repetition enables students to memorise while variation enhances understanding. Therefore, when repetition and variation are intertwined, students will remember what they understand.

According to Biggs (1996a), there is a difference between rote learning and repetitive learning. Students adopting the former generally do not focus on meaning as compared to the latter. This is evidenced by Cooper (2004) where a longitudinal study was carried out in comparing Chinese (Malaysian) and Australian (with a predominantly Western background) accounting students in their approaches to learning, and the effect of their approaches on their academic performance. Chinese students adopting surface approaches to learning achieved high levels of academic performance, unlike their Western counterparts adopting similar approaches. The findings supported earlier studies related to cultural differences by Biggs (1991), Kember and Gow (1991) and Watkins and Regmi (1990). The Cooper (2004) study found differences in the learning approach of Chinese students and Australian students, with the Chinese students exhibiting higher Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) scores for surface learning than the Australian students, whilst also exhibiting higher scores for deep approaches. Despite the higher SPQ scores in the surface approach of the Chinese students, they performed academically better than their Western counterparts (Cooper, 2004). This study supports the findings of Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse (1993) who claim that what appears to be surface learning used by Chinese students, can in fact lead to a deeper understanding and not just mechanical rote learning as perceived by many Western teachers.

Another study by Ramburuth (2000) comparing the approaches to learning by international (mainly Hong Kong Chinese) and local Australian business students, found the international students displayed significantly higher group means for the
surface approach to learning, surface motivation and the use of surface strategies. These students were also different from their Australian counterparts on all dimensions of the surface approach. A test of postgraduate international students also demonstrated higher use of the surface approach and surface strategies. The international students, at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level, also demonstrated more frequent uses of deep approaches than Australian students and Ramburuth (2000) concluded that the two constructs of deep and surface may not be mutually exclusive. It was further concluded that the results tend to support the concerns of Marton et al., (1993), that because of the inter-weaving relationship they identified between memorising (associated with the surface approach to learning) and understanding (associated with the deep approach), the surface/deep framework needs to be used with care in assessing the learning behaviour of students from certain cultural backgrounds.

2.6.2.2 Memorisation in Learning
Chinese students seem to focus on memorisation and practice in order to perform well in examinations. As discussed in the next chapter on the influence of Chinese culture on students’ learning, the much practised learning strategies in China are observation, memorisation and replication (Ginsburg, 1992). As Ginsburg observes, in China, the teachers are responsible and obligated to teach students all that is needed for the student to pass the examinations. Hence, if the student studies diligently and follows all the teachings of the teacher faithfully, the student will then have the right to pass the examination. However, if the student does not succeed, the teacher will be severely criticised as she/he accepts the blame to have misled the student in some way that resulted in the failure. The students will then have to repeat the semester with the same teacher. Cheng (1994, p. 79) notes that ‘….students’ hard work is often translated into teachers’ hard work in China. Therefore, to prevent teachers from ‘loosing face’, students will diligently memorise and practice according to the instructions of the teachers’.
Liu (1986, p. 80, 82 cited by Leung, 1998) describes the focus on memorisation and practice in Chinese teaching as ‘….If the purpose is to acquire the knowledge contained in an article, then the next strategy is to memorise the article. If the purpose is to acquire any new cognitive skill, then the best strategy is to practise repeatedly.’ Also, according to Leung (1998, p. 32), ‘….a true Confucian scholar is one who dedicates himself to studying or seeking knowledge through a lot of practice and memorisation. At the same time, he constantly reflects upon what he is practising and memorising until he fully grasps the knowledge he is seeking.’ There is arguably a general belief that memorisation does not enhance understanding and in fact they are mutually exclusive (Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse, 1996). However, contrary to that belief, it has long been established in Chinese culture that Chinese learners memorise with understanding (Wong and Wen, 2001). In the study by Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse, (1996), it was found that understanding is seen as the sum total of all that is remembered or memorised and hence the two are seen not to differ in nature. In fact, the two appear to be mixed and are intertwined by way of enhancing each other in a developmental sense (Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse, 1996; Marton, Wen and Wong, 2005; Entwistle and Entwistle, 2003). It has also been pointed out by others that memorisation should not be equated with rote learning (Biggs, 1996a; Lee, 1996).

Watkins and Biggs (1996) have also indicated that memorisation may not be as simple as one assumes. In fact, research by Marton et al., (1993; 1996) and Watkins and Biggs, 1996) has distinguished between meaningless memorising and meaningful memorising. These two different types of memorisation are also known as mechanical memorisation (rote learning) and memorisation with understanding (or deep learning) (Marton et al., 1996). On top of these two types of memorisation, research such as Dahlin and Watkins (2000), Meyer (2000), Meyer and Shanahan (2003) and Lucas and Meyer (2005), have extended and refined the contrasting forms of memorisation to four other types of memorising and repetition learning processes, namely, memorising before understanding; memorising after understanding; rereading a text; repetition as an aid to understanding as presented below.
As Meyer (2000) clarifies, memorising before understanding differs from mechanical memorising (a pure form of mechanical repetition or known as *memorising as rehearsal* or rote learning), although they are interrelated and constitute surface level sources of variation in students’ learning. The former form of memorisation involves committing material which is not comprehended to longer term memory, while the later tends to recycle material that is not understood in primary memory for some purpose and subsequently forgotten. They are distinct from the other four types of memorisation which involve comprehension and constitute deep level sources of variation in students learning, such as memorising after understanding, memorising with understanding, rereading a text and repetition as an aid to understanding.

*Memorising after understanding* is a very common practice and is where one remembers or memorises when one understands (Marton *et al.*, 1996; Meyer, 2000), while *memorising with understanding* are coincidental (Meyer, 2000; Meyer and Shanahan, 2003). Meyer further explains that in this case, repetition is not necessary in the memorising process, as memorising and understanding can happen at the same time, even without any repetition. In support of this view, Biggs and Watkins (2001; 1996) have noted that memorisation and understanding are not viewed as separate qualities; instead they are recognised as part of an intertwining process. The ideas of critical understanding have a long-standing tradition upheld by Confucius that says ‘….seeking knowledge without thinking is labour lost; thinking without seeking knowledge is perilous’ (Chan, 2001, p. 193).
It is this type of memorisation that Chinese learners adopt in their learning, that is, memorising materials whose meaning has been understood and memorisation with understanding through repetition and not the kind of mechanical or rote memorisation so often misunderstood by many Western teachers. In other words, the Chinese learners in fact use a deep level process of memorising. Hence, this helps explain the paradox of why Chinese learners who seemed to employ a surface approach to learning outperform their Western counterparts (Marton et al., 1993, Cooper, 2004).

In addition, since Chinese children are trained from a young age to memorise chapters in Chinese language textbooks, it is therefore not uncommon to find Chinese students having better memory power than their Western counterparts. According to research by Hoosian (1979) and Huang and Liu (1978), Chinese students are reported to have a seemingly superior performance in memorisation tasks. In addition, as argued by Jackling (2005b), some students do adopt memorisation in their learning when they perceive that the assessment tasks require this approach.

2.6.3 Perception of task requirements
Various studies (e.g., Prosser and Trigwell, 1999 and Ramsden, 1992) have shown that the approaches that students employ in their learning are in turn affected by how students perceive the task requirements of the learning context. Students’ perceptions of the task requirements refers to the manner in which they view the demands and expectations of the learning context or environment, which includes, but is not limited to, teaching, curriculum and assessment as depicted in Figure 2.2 above. It was found in the interviews conducted by Ramsden (1979, 1981) that inappropriate assessment procedures, lecturers who taught badly and had heavy workloads, could discourage positive attitudes towards learning and induce the adoption of surface approach.
On the contrary, when the teaching is effective in terms of assistance with approaches to studying and genuine commitment of the teachers in the subject and the students’ learning, positive attitudes towards learning could be encouraged and students would more likely engage in a deep approach to learning. The original research by Ramsden (1979, 1981) is supported by the work of Gow and Kember (1990); Saljo and Richardson (2003); Lizzio et al., (2002); Prosser, (2000) and more recently Nijhuis et al., (2007) that students’ perceptions of good teaching, clear goals, appropriate workload, appropriate assessment and independent learning are positively related to a deep approach to learning. The work by Volet and Renshaw (1996) also found that both Asian (Chinese) and Western students’ perceptions of assessment and course requirements do ultimately influence their approach to learning.

Further, to address the issues of students’ perceptions of the learning context, Ramsden (1979) introduced a Course Perceptions Questionnaire (CPQ). The CPQ was used by Ramsden in a study to investigate the dimensions perceived by students to be important in the learning environment. In the study, eight items were identified and they appear in order of importance in the Table 2.4. Subsequently, Ramsden (2003; 1991) designed and developed what is known as the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) to measure students’ perceptions regarding five key areas of a positive learning context, such as good teaching, clear goals and standards, appropriate assessment, and focus on independence. A positive context or environment will enhance a deep approach to learning. Given that most individuals seem to employ an approach to learning that they view to be appropriate for a particular situation, it is therefore vital to acknowledge that ‘it is the student’s perception of the factors that is crucial and the student’s perception may be different from that of the institution that is overseeing the learning process’ (Hassall and Joyce, 2001, p. 146).
Table 2.4 Dimensions of Learning Environments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships with students</th>
<th>Closeness of lecturer/student relationships; help and understanding shown to students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to teaching</td>
<td>Commitment of staff to improving teaching and to teaching students at a level appropriate to their current understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-load</td>
<td>Pressure placed on students in terms of demands of the syllabus and assessment tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal teaching methods</td>
<td>Formality or informality of teaching and learning (e.g. lectures v. individual study).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational relevance</td>
<td>Perceived relevance of courses to students’ careers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social climate</td>
<td>Frequency and quality of academic and social relationships between students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear goals and standards</td>
<td>Extent to which standards expected of students are clear and unambiguous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom in learning</td>
<td>Amount of discretion possessed by students in choosing and organising academic work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ramsden, 1979, page. 416

The study by Ramsden (1979) indicated that the first and most important factor in a learning environment was the lecturers’ relationship with students and commitment to good teaching. This is agreed by Asmar, Proude and Inge (2004), who noted that the context of integrating students into a community of learners and interactions with student peers and with teaching staff, are a very important aspect of university student learning. This is also strongly supported by Tan and Simpson (2008) who view friendliness and helpfulness of teachers as of paramount importance to students. In other words, a student’s perception of the learning context is an integral part of his or her experience of learning (Ramsden, 1994). As such, the teacher/student relationship is added to the model of this study as a variable of interest to be investigated.

According to Salili, Chiu and Lai (2001), there are different levels of learning context. At the school and classroom level, learning context is ‘reflected in the students’ perceptions of the school environment, the nature of the learning task, assessment
methods, attitudes and expectations of peers and teachers, students' interactions with their peers and teachers, as well as the school culture in general... while at a more general level, learning context is influenced by the culture of a society' (p. 1). Salili, Chiu and Lai (2001), also found that Hong Kong Chinese students spend much more time on their studies and are more determined in achieving social solidarity goals (defined as goals related to pleasing parents, teachers, and peers) than do their Canadian counterparts (Chinese and European background). Contradictory to other findings, the study found that despite the amount of time Hong Kong Chinese students spend on studying, they achieved significantly lower examination marks than do Canadian students. Hence, the reasons for such an outcome could be due to the contextual differences in the Hong Kong and Canadian school systems. It is also observed that students’ perceptions are affected by differences in age, maturity, ethnicity, gender (Ferreira and Santos, 2008) and their personality traits (Nijhuis et al., 2007).

2.6.4 Context of learning

Context of learning may be viewed in terms of the nature of the course as well as the teaching within the course (English, Luckett and Mladenovic, 2004). Therefore it can include syllabi, past examination papers, teaching methods, teaching pace, evaluation and feedback, and helpfulness and friendliness of the lecturers (Ramsden, 1992). It is important to note that students’ perception of the task requirements within the context of learning could be different from the actual requirement of, or expectation from, the task itself. Moreover, studies have indicated that lecturers tend to attribute the academic performance of a student to the student's characteristics instead of their own teaching style (Ramsden, 1981). Nonetheless, as noted by Ramsden and Entwistle (1981), it is not so much how lecturers say they teach that is important, but how the students perceive the courses and the teaching.

For the purpose of this study, the learning context listed in Ramsden’s model such as, teaching, curriculum (in terms of workload and English language) and assessment will be investigated. This study will also consider variables of interest which are important
to the Mainland Chinese students, such as the teacher/student relationship. A review of the accounting education literature has indicated the importance and difficulties facing international students in using English language in Australian universities and therefore this study has included it as a variable of interest to be investigated. Before moving on to the final two variables in Ramsden’s model (orientation to studying and previous educational experiences), the following sections will explore the learning context or variables of interest which are investigated in this study, which are in the order: teaching, teacher/student relationship, assessment, workload and English language.

2.6.4.1 Teaching, Teacher/Student relationship
In the studies carried out by Ramsden (1984), it was reported that lecturers in higher education have a far-reaching influence on student learning. Although the relationships identified in his studies are not direct between teaching methods and student achievement, there is an indirect relationship. It connects students’ perceptions of lecturers’ approaches and students’ orientations to studying. It was found that students may begin to experience the relevance of the content of the lecture for their own understanding, if the lecturer can communicate interest and enthusiasm as well as information. Lord and Robertson (2006) pointed out that the lecturer’s role does not cease transferring knowledge and information; instead it should proceed to transformation of knowledge. Further, the study by Tan and Simpson (2008) on international students in New Zealand concluded that there are expectations of academic staff to possess industry experience, excellent communication skills and be readily available to students.

In addition, the lecturer’s interest in students and helpfulness with study difficulties, are the first of the important qualities influencing students’ attitudes and approaches. Further, interviews by Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) show that in addition to course structure, the quality of teaching and attitude of lecturers influence students in their approach to studying. Moreover, as discussed earlier, commitment to teaching and
the relationship with students have also been reported to be the most important elements in students’ study orientation. In a research project where 94,835 graduates from 14 universities made 168,376 comments in the first database of its kind in the world, it was found that engagement with teachers is most highly valued by students in learning (Illing, 2006). It was also reported in a course experience questionnaire (CEQ) that students want ‘….practical, interactive, face to face learning with stimulating teachers’ (Illing, 2006, p. 35). The extensive database is a three year project that looked at student feedback in order to help lift the teaching standards and improve student retention rates in universities.

2.6.4.2 Assessment
Assessments have often been regarded as a technical device in measuring students’ academic performance or achievement (Dahlin, Watkins and Ekholm, 2001). It is also ‘….a means of engaging students in self-reflection and acknowledging their role as collaborators in the learning process’ (Jackson et al., 2006a, p. 24). Some of the different forms of assessment includes, but is not limited to, written tests and/or examination, assignments, oral presentations, role plays, debates etc. According to Hand, Sanderson and O’Neil (1996), assessment focuses the attention of both students and staff upon what is important with regard to the content and purpose of an undergraduate’s education.

For the student, the demands of assessment inform and shape the learning strategies she/he will adopt (Biggs, 1989), whilst for teachers a re-examination of the assessment strategy provides a rationale for determining the style and content of a particular course. In a recent study by Watty et al., (2010), it is found that the manner in which assessment is designed and written as well as how lecturers relate their expectations on the way the assessment is to be undertaken are important elements that would influence the way students perform in those assessments. Therefore, assessment is indeed a major influence upon the quality of the learning process. Moreover, as noted by Ramsden (1984), the perceived assessment requirements are
strong influences on the approach to learning a student adopts when tackling an academic task. Also, the manner in which educators indicate their expectation of the assessment, as well as the design and format in which the assessment is written itself, is crucial to how students from different countries perform in that assessment (Jackson et al., 2006a).

Tang and Biggs (1996) found that when students have a quantitative perception of the demands of a test, they will more likely rote learn, memorise and reproduce. They view effort and time as the means to achieving success. On the other hand, if students take on a qualitative perception of test demands, they see understanding and application as the requirement to success and hence more effort is organised to understand the study material. Further, it is not uncommon that students’ perceptions on test demands may well share both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. In other words, students may memorise what they had understood or studied.

Ramsden (1984) observes that inappropriate assessment questions or techniques may force students into taking reproductive or surface approaches. In other words, inappropriate assessment will invite, or even demand, rote learning. Moreover, not every student responds to assessment pressures in the same way, but the range of responses itself demonstrates the powerful effects of the perceived assessment context (Ramsden, 1984). As such, some students will actively exploit the opportunities offered by assessment methods, which allow good grades to be obtained without understanding or without personal commitment to what is being studied, while others will accept the system at face value (Ramsden, 1979).

As reported by Thomas and Bain (1984), the majority of students made greater use of surface approaches for multiple-choice or short answer tests, while deep approaches were used with open-ended assignments. Therefore, as Ramsden’s (1984) findings suggest, the experience of learning is greatly affected by assessment methods perceived to be inappropriate. This is even more so for international students who might have an entirely different assessment method in her/his home country. For
example in China, owing to the competition for places in higher education, which is driven by a strong examination system, students tend to view the education experience extremely competitively (Turner and Acker, 2002). Therefore, other forms of assessment besides examinations are generally foreign to Chinese students. As will be discussed in the next chapter, examinations in China are generally accepted as the only measure of one’s academic accomplishment. However, in Western universities, examinations are merely one of many different measures of assessment. Therefore, as observed by Turner and Acker (2002), Chinese students find group work activities one of the most difficult aspects of studying in the Western educational framework. As reported in their study, Chinese students felt that group activities were just playing, not learning because the learning was far remote from the formal mode to which they were accustomed. Hence this form of assessment will certainly inject a high level of performance stress in to the way in which Chinese students may approach the learning environment. Further, Dahlin, Watkins and Ekholm (2001) have explained the term “backwash effect” that has been used for the phenomenon of the influence of assessment forms on learning strategies by Biggs (1995), which ranges over four positions. They can be summarised as follows:

- First, assessment has an impact on students’ motivation and effort. It is argued that one will be stimulated to work harder upon knowing that one will be tested on one’s knowledge.
- Assessment can also be seen as pointing out important knowledge areas. Students are very keen in knowing what earlier assessments were like, so as to have an idea of what curriculum content is important to focus on. Basically, assessments direct students in reading and studying selectively. In other words, what is not likely to be tested in the exams is skipped over.
- Assessment can be seen as affecting the quality of students’ understanding as a learning outcome and not as a learning strategy.
- Assessment can be seen as affecting the learning strategies and processes students use and go through during course work, which will also affect the learning outcomes.
However, as pointed out by Tang and Biggs (1996), it is the student’s perception of the assessment and the demands it makes that generates this backwash effect. The student’s perception of what is to be assessed could be entirely different to what the teacher intends to be assessed. Further, how students perceive the examination context will bring about a different meaning of understanding. In other words, students often interpret and construct the content of what is taught, in order to meet the perceived need for the kind of understanding that is needed in assessment. Hence, students may well adopt different approaches to learning according to what the students perceived as the particular emphasis of the assessment task. The study by Tang and Biggs (1996) also found that Hong Kong’s competitive and examination-oriented education system in fact encourages a surface approach to learning. It has also been observed that while the more able students are flexible in adopting different approaches to learning as they see fit, the less able students are restricted to engage in the surface approach to learning in order to survive in the competitive examination system in Hong Kong (Ho, Peng and Chan, 2002).

2.6.4.3 Workload

As reported by Ramsden (1984), students often explained surface approaches or negative attitudes in terms of their experience of excessive workloads. The factual overburdening of syllabuses explains why students can display a poor level of understanding in assessments that demand something more than the reproduction of well-rehearsed answers. According to the study by Gow, Kember and Cooper (1994), accountancy students commented that they did not have enough time to think and study on their own because of the number of lectures they were required to attend. Further, some students reported that they did not read as widely as they should because of study pressures. Faced with the large quantity of knowledge they had to absorb, students tended to abandon the search for meaning and resorted to memorising algorithmic procedures for answering problems in order to pass examinations. Therefore, if these students are burdened with an excessive workload on top of the struggles Chinese students have in English language, they will most
likely resort to mechanical memorising in order to survive in the examination. According to Johnson and Yau (1996), students who appear to be inadequate in English may still obtain high marks through judicious use of memorised material.

2.6.4.4 English language

One of the key findings in a report to the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (Jackson et al., 2006a) is the significant impact of English competency of students (who were undertaking accounting assessment) on their learning. This is strongly supported by the work of Watty et al., (2010). As such, the English competency of students is an area of concern to many (educators, student themselves, future employers etc), specifically those students from a non-English speaking country such as China. The literature has also pointed out that Chinese students in particular, lack confidence in speaking English and hence can be reluctant to participate in class discussions or ask questions in class (Gan, 2009; Sawir, 2005; Hellsten and Prescott, 2004). Samuelowicz (1987b) compared the perceptions of overseas students’ learning problems by the overseas students themselves and perceptions of the lecturers and it was found that both lecturers and students perceived language difficulties as the greatest hurdle. It was also found that language difficulties are fairly easy to be noticed and often mask more important problems. Over 50 per cent of the students in the Samuelowicz (1987a) study perceived language difficulties as important or very important. The study by Wong (2004) also found international students’ difficulties in English language were exacerbated by cultural barriers and hence identified as the main source of learning difficulties in Australia. This also appeared to be one of the key findings in the project on assessing students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian University by Jackson et al., (2006a).

One of the reasons why many international students have problems with the English language could stem from the way English itself is being spoken in Australia. Researchers at the University of Wollongong have reported the difficulties of many international students in understanding lectures, as the Australian accent was too
strong, lecturers spoke too fast, mumbled, slurred and even shortened their words (O’Keefe, 2006). As explained in the report, ‘Words, such as, “brekkie” for breakfast, “sickie” for sick day off work, “footie” for football are part of this truncation of words that international students found confusing’ (Kell and Vogl, 2007, p. 208). The English that most international students learned is more formal, very unlike the casual delivery in lectures. One of the participants in the focus group discussion explained, ‘….when I came to Australia, I’m thinking what is going on and they put every word together and it’s very different, it’s not like English but it’s English’ (Kell and Vogl, 2007, p. 209). Therefore, most of them found Australians hard to understand and were often too embarrassed to ask one to repeat her/himself.

English as a second or even third language is another reason why international students find it difficult. In particular, most Mainland Chinese students have difficulties coping with English. These students are not as exposed to English language as Chinese students from other Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, where English is more commonly used as a means of communication. In China, all through primary and secondary schools, Mandarin is the only language that is widely used both in text and communication. Furthermore, Oriental thought patterns as reflected in its paragraph structure tend to be indirect, while English thinking tends to be direct (Ginsburg, 1992). This may be one of the reasons why compositions written by these students lack coherence or organisation or are even out of focus to Western educators. According to Ginsburg (1992), the way English is taught in China is by memorising structured dialogues or translating written text aloud. In other words, there is a great lack of focus on spoken verbal skills, as most of the time the only means by which English is learned is reading. This is agreed by Sawir (2005), who noted that oral communication skills such as speaking and listening are often ignored and students are rarely given the chance to use English in conversation in class. Therefore, in order to acquire English language in preparation for their overseas education, students are sent to attend English tuition classes. Further, only parents who can afford the high tuition fees can send their children to these English classes.
Thus, most students coming from China are inadequately equipped in terms of English language, since throughout their education it has been in the Chinese medium. Moreover, even though they might have attended English classes, they would have been conducted by another Chinese who happens to speak English. Some researchers have even pointed out that, in most instances, English instructions were delivered using the students’ own native language (Sawir, 2005). In other words, the English teachers themselves were neither confident nor competent enough to converse and teach in English. Therefore, the majority of the Chinese that arrive in Australia for their education will find it most difficult (in the initial years at least) understanding the English language spoken by the locals.

According to Kirby et al., (1996, p. 149), there are challenges facing Asian students who study in English-speaking countries, in that ‘...not only must they master the content and concepts of their discipline, and do so through the medium of a language which they may not fully command, but frequently they must do this within an educational and cultural context quite different from their own’. Most Chinese students will find that there is a gap between their proficiency level and the level that is required of them in a Western university (Johnson and Yau, 1996) that rewards the assertive and highly verbal (Ginsburg, 1992). Kirby et al., (1996) further suggested that one way to compensate for students’ lack of fluency in English is through facilitating students’ access to the information taught in text. Another option is by way of summarising, which may lead to an increase in both comprehension and recall. The language issue is also strongly supported by Lindahl and Fanelli (2002), who observed that although using the same material, agenda, textbook and mode of delivery for both American students and international students, there was an abrupt drop in student satisfaction by international students. This indicates that the international students possessed a different set of expectations from their Western peers, due to cultural differences and environment. In their conclusion, Lindahl and Finelli (2002) pointed out two important factors in an international teaching environment, which include that expectations about the “deliverables” in a class must be addressed and careful attention must be paid to the needs of students for whom English is a second language. In the Lindahl and
Finelli (2002) study, language problems were ameliorated by (a) short cases; (b) a concise text; (c) a loud, clear voice; and (d) written handouts.

2.6.5 Orientation to studying
According to Ramsden’s model, how students perceive the task requirements of the learning context is influenced by their orientation to studying. Biggs (2001) refers orientation to studying as ‘preferences or predispositions to use a particular approach’ in learning or one’s natural tendency to use a particular approach. Biggs further explains that such preference or tendency is influenced by one’s previous educational experience, the learning context, culture and individual characteristics etc. Ramsden (1992, p. 51) further clarifies that ‘…although it is abundantly clear that the same student uses different approaches on different occasions, it is also true that general tendencies to adopt particular approaches, related to the different demands of course and previous educational experiences, do exist. Variability in approaches thus coexists with consistency’.

Lucas (2001, pp. 162) further observes that, ‘…the term orientation is used to represent a combination of approaches, styles, motivations and study methods’. She further pointed out that student’s orientation to studying does vary in accordance to the learning context. As such, students who have an orientation towards a surface approach to learning could well be encouraged to adopt a deep approach to learning via the context or environment that encourages it. Therefore, as highlighted by Biggs and Ramsden, educators are urged to consider the different ways of engaging students with a deep approach to learning by way of modifying or designing the learning contexts (Nijhuis et al., 2005). As Ramsden (2003; 1992) has acknowledged, an appropriate design of the learning context is particularly crucial for first year students, in order to cultivate and encourage more sophisticated approaches to university learning. Students’ orientation to studying can be identified by inventory-based research such as the Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) developed by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) and the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) developed by Biggs (1985).
In Western countries such as Australia, tertiary students are generally expected to be more self-reliant and individualistic in their learning (Ginsburg, 1992). In other words, the common trend in Western education is learner-centred, as opposed to teacher-centred, which is the practice in most Asian countries. As noted by Wang and Shan (2007), Chinese students’ preference for didactic or teacher centred learning is mostly due to their previous educational experience. However, according to Abeysekera (2008) and Ward and Kennedy (1996; 1992), international students have the ability to adopt and accept the societal culture of a host country. In fact, studies have demonstrated that students can learn to be more self-regulated in their learning (Pintrich, 1995; Zimmerman and Schunk, 2001). The work of Volet, Renshaw and Tietzel (1994) supports the notion and found that international Asian students’ approaches to studying became more similar to that of their Australian counterparts in an undergraduate degree by the end of their first semester of study, in the same course from the same university. They concluded that it was students’ perceptions of course requirements that were the cause of the change in their patterns of study approaches. Although the study was conducted on predominantly Singaporean students rather than Mainland Chinese (being the main focus of the current study), it helps illustrate the point that student learning is susceptible to change and influence.

2.6.6 Previous educational experience

Students’ interpretation of their previous educational experience and learning backgrounds has a significant influence on their orientation to studying and capabilities in learning (Honkimaki, Tynjala and Valkonen, 2004; Dochy et al., 2002; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). This is also observed by Guild and Garger (1998) who highlighted the influence of individual’s early life experiences as well as cultural values on one’s learning. Gardner (1991, p. 38) echoes this perspective: ‘[W]e are as much creatures of our culture as we are creatures of our brain’. Recent work by Abhayawansa and Fonsecam (2010) also strongly supports such a notion. These previous learning experiences may in fact have a cause and effect relationship with a
student’s orientation to learning to the extent that it determines the manner an individual student regulates her/his own learning.

In addition, numerous studies have found that students are mainly resistant to try to change the manner in which they approach their learning (Ramsden, 1992; Kember and Gow, 1989; Biggs and Rihn, 1984; Marton and Saljo, 1984). Crawford et al., (1999) argued that students’ previous experience of their learning in secondary school is definitely a major influence on the approaches to learning they deploy at university. Students’ experience of their previous educational environment which encouraged a certain approach to learning could lead to the habitual tendencies by the students to continue using those approaches in their learning at tertiary level (Ramsden, 2003; 1991), although students’ perceptions of current educational environment may lead to adaptation or changes.

Further, the educational and cultural background and experiences in Mainland China educational institutions differ vastly from those in Western universities. The education system in an Asian culture focuses on conservation and reproduction of knowledge, which is contrary to that of the Western system (Wong, 2004). According to Egege and Kutieleh (2004), it is extremely difficult to breach the learning transition of students from Asian countries such as China, as the knowledge traditions vary significantly from those of the Western countries. Therefore, it is essential to look into an individual’s previous educational and cultural experience in China, in order to better understand the learning behaviours of the Chinese students in this study. As discussed in the following chapter, the key influences of the Chinese culture is strongly embedded in the educational experience in China. Therefore, Chapter 3 will further discuss the cultural aspects of the Chinese as they are explicitly linked to Ramsden’s model on students’ past educational experience in this study.

In summary, this chapter has explored students’ approaches to learning, conceptions of learning and the seminal research by Ramsden on the learning context as experienced by university students. Discussion of the model introduced by Ramsden,
the ‘student learning context’ was undertaken, along with a literature review on the importance of students’ perceptions of the learning context and its impact on their studies. In particular, this chapter looked at the learning context such as, teaching, teacher/student relationship, assessment, workload and the English language, all of which are considered important to Mainland Chinese students.
Chapter 3

THE CHINESE CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

This chapter examines the cultural background and previous educational experience of Mainland Chinese students. With the use of Ramsden’s ‘student learning in context’ model, in which this study is based, it is critical to also understand the Chinese cultural and educational context. It is not uncommon that teachers coming from a Western educational system are likely to appear unaware of the culture of learning in students’ home countries, especially in a Confucian heritage culture. For example, according to Scollon (1999, p. 27), ‘Western teachers unaccustomed to a classroom full of Asian students all too frequently feel that their words are going to waste because they do not get the feedback they are accustomed to, not only in terms of comments and questions, but in head movement and facial expression’. Therefore, it is essential in this study to consider background knowledge of the Chinese culture and their educational system, as it has a significant impact on students’ behaviour, attitude and responses towards their learning when they commence university studies in Australia. As highlighted by Seo and Koro-Ljungberg (2005, p. 184), ‘….without understanding the role of cultural identity and heritage embedded in a particular cultural framework, higher education cannot achieve one of its most important goals: to provide quality education for all’

3.1 THE CHINESE CULTURAL CONTEXT

Culture is defined as ‘….the customary ways of acting, thinking and feeling that are common to the members of a society and sustain their relationships, and one of the most significant things about culture is that it becomes so much a part of an individual that one loses awareness of how it shapes one’s perception and organises one’s life’ (Nuthall, 2005, p. 896). According to Aguinis and Roth (2003), culture is also viewed as a construct that results from shared experiences such as a common history and geography. Further, culture applies to a collective; in other words, it applies to a group
of individuals. Also, as observed by Aguinis and Roth (2003), culture is multi-faceted, which means that in order to describe a group’s culture, one needs to look at more than one dimension (such as, individualism versus collectivism, power distance, Confucianism etc). These dimensions will be considered later in the chapter.

As descendants of a Confucian heritage, cultural values and beliefs have always been an inseparable and an important part of being Chinese. According to Chan (1999), it is these values and beliefs that have helped shape Chinese thinking and as also pointed out by Biggs (1996a), researchers must not only observe teaching and learning behaviours at the surface level, but should understand the cultural roots and assumptions of the observed behaviours. According to Levinsohn (2007), Chinese students’ learning motivation is driven by their culture, besides family and other outside factors. The notion that cultural factors play an important role in one’s learning is also supported by Devlin and Godfrey (2004). In their research on exporting accounting education to Albania, they found that the unwillingness of the participants in taking responsibility for their own learning is directly related to the culture. The dominant culture of Albanians has been ‘built into their living’ throughout their entire history and therefore the notion of independent learning is completely foreign to them.

3.1.1 Common misunderstanding

Han (2005, p. 209) commented that ‘….culture underpins learners’ judgments and perceptions of teachers and teaching styles’, which is also supported by Kennedy (2002) in his research into learning as influenced by Chinese culture. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to research and understand Chinese students’ learning within their cultural milieu. Moreover, in teaching across cultures, one must be careful not to reflect a ‘pseudoetic’ vision of cross culture comparisons as mentioned by Poortinga and Triandis (1972), where concepts from one culture (usually Western) are imposed on another, as if they are universal. The danger is where ‘the Western teachers of international students see student behaviour and expectations as disturbingly different, and impose the Western way as correct’ (Biggs, 2001, p. 295). This is illustrated by Biggs in his observation of the initial reaction of one expatriate
teacher teaching in Hong Kong: ‘I found the deathly silence that preceded the start of the lecture quite unnerving, the more so when my open-ended questions met with no response. I had to plough on, and if as was likely, I ran out of prepared material, I had to ad lib until the scheduled end of the lecture’ (Biggs, 1989, p. 3). As Biggs discussed, the expatriate teacher naively expected the Hong Kong students to behave like Western students, who would spontaneously ask questions and volunteer comments. When the Hong Kong students failed to behave as the teacher expected, the initial reaction was to blame the students for their passivity, or even blame oneself for not using the correct method to elicit questions and comments (Biggs 2001). As Biggs (2001, p. 295) further commented, ‘….exceptionality here takes a rather bizarre meaning in that an alien culture sees the local culture as the exception’.

According to Lee (1996) and Stevenson (1992), Western society tends to have a fundamental misunderstanding of Far Eastern educational methods and this could be attributed to the ignorance of the culture itself. This is reiterated by Ryan and Louie (2007, p. 3) who gave an example of how a lack of awareness on the part of the teacher could lead to misunderstanding, ‘….the lack of training in teaching students from different cultural backgrounds has not helped matters, and lecturers understandably often feel that the demands placed on them are unreasonable. Such radical changes in workload and the types of issues confronting academics sometimes mean that their reactions are negative and hostile’. The researchers further pointed out that Western educators fail to acknowledge the supposedly ‘Western’ ideas of education, such as lifelong learning or self-regulated learning, may be manifested differently in different places. Therefore, cross-cultural studies and research will enable Western educators, in particular, to improve the learning environment, as well as to minimise any misunderstandings of learning strategies of Chinese students.

Western educators of East Asian students (e.g., from China, Japan, Korea), can often fall into the same trap of seeing these students as exceptional and therefore stereotyping them, with the same potential damage for enlightened teaching (Biggs, 2001). Various studies (Biggs and Watkins, 2001; Biggs, 1996a; Volet and Renshaw,
often characterise Chinese and other East Asian students studying in Western institutions as being intellectually passive, uncritical in their acceptance of content and reluctant to be involved in intellectual dissent. According to Egege and Kutieleh (2004, p. 76), some educators of Chinese students in Australian universities describe these students as ‘…a stereotype of passive, non-critical rote-learning students who do not engage in deep thinking’. With such perceived problems coming from the different learning approaches, researchers such as Biggs (1996a) and Tsolidis (2001) see it as an issue in need of attention. Therefore, in order to better understand the learning behaviour and hence address the perceived problems of the Chinese learners, it is worthwhile looking at the teaching of Confucius, from which the historical impact of education in Chinese culture is derived.

3.1.2 Confucianism

Basically, Chinese culture is rooted in Confucianism. Confucianism is derived from what Confucius saw as lessons of Chinese history and hence drafted a set of pragmatic rules for daily life. Researchers of cross-cultural studies, such as Levinsohn (2007), have supported the notion that intrinsic cultural factors (Chinese Confucianism) can influence students’ learning. First and foremost, traditional Chinese culture often concentrates on effort rather than ability.

‘Talent and will come first in study; will is the teacher of study and talent is the follower of study. If a person has no talent, it (achievement) is possible. But if he has no will, it is not worth talking about study.’ (Xu Gan, Zhong Lun-Huang, 1969)

Influenced by the cultural values of hard work and endurance, besides having a great sense of duty towards the parents (Deutsch, 2006), Chinese students accept responsibility for their success and failure (Salili, 1996). From a young age, Chinese children are taught to emphasise on the exertion of effort and have the obligation to bring honour and recognition to their families (Chang et al., 2004). According to Salili (1996), Chinese students spend more time in their studies than Western students and
yet the majority are not satisfied with their achievement and still believe that they can work harder. Similarly, according to Kim, Grant and Dweck (1999), in both the academic and workplace setting in Korea, one is always encouraged to work harder and no matter how hard one has worked, one can always work even harder.

In modern Chinese society today, Confucianism is still a critical element of Chinese cultural identity. Watkins and Biggs (1996) see Confucian tradition as having an extraordinary emphasis on effort, willpower or concentration of the mind. They also note that there is a strong belief in attainability by all and that one’s failure is not due to one’s internal makeup or ability, but one’s effort and willpower. This is strongly agreed to by Han (2005) where she also noted that success or failure in studies is a result of one’s effort and willpower rather than one’s ability. In other words, despite one’s level of intelligence, ‘…if one tries and keeps trying, one will certainly get there sooner or later’, (Lee, 1996, p. 39). This is clearly illustrated by a Chinese proverb that says ‘diligence compensates for stupidity’. Chan (1999) observes that ‘….the type of learning required to be literate in the Chinese language means that effort and repetition are key factors for academic success’. Also, as Han (2005, p. 202) has commented, ‘…the view of ability is flexible, fixable and controllable...’ This notion is also strongly supported by Salili (2001). However, in Western culture, a student’s ability is generally regarded as more important than effort for academic success. This is evidenced in a study by Hess, Chang and McDevitt (1987), where, unlike the Chinese, the Americans in the study rarely attributed their children’s failure to a lack of effort.

Further, it is not uncommon for researchers on cultural studies to categorise societies based on their defining characteristics, in order to better understand the cultural identity of the learners. Of the many researchers on cultural issues, Hofstede (1986) has contributed greatly to the literature on cross cultural studies and has pointed out some major characteristics and differences among societies. As observed by Ramburuth and McCormick (2001), culturally-based values relating to Hofstede’s collectivism/individualism dimension is one of the most influential factors affecting
students’ learning. This study considers Hofstede’s (1986) societal culture dimensions, in understanding Chinese students’ cultural and educational background. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions have been widely applied in accounting studies by other researchers such as Abeysekera (2008), Sugahara and Boland (2010) and Williams and Seaman (2004). For example, Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance dimension identifies learners in strong uncertainty avoidance societies, such as in Asian countries, as preferring a more structured learning environment. These students would then expect the teacher, as the more knowledgeable person, to teach (Hofstede, 1986).

Numerous cross-cultural researchers such as Triandis (1995), Tang (1996), Salili (1996) and Shi et al., (2001), have claimed and demonstrated that societies such as that in China display a more collectivist-orientated culture (Hofstede, 1986; 2001) than the individualistic culture of Western countries. Collectivism is defined by Hofstede (1983, p. 83) as ‘….a preference for a tightly-knit social framework in which individuals can expect their relatives, clan, or other in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty’. In his study, Triandis (1995) highlighted that Chinese collectivism tends to support a vertical structure that values loyalty and obedience to authority. It does not recognise equality, which is said to be the root cause of a person’s obstinacy, egotism and dogmatism (Zhou, 2002). Learning behaviour such as collaborative learning or forming study groups is a common practice in China and a collectivist mentality supports cooperation (Biggs, 1996). The study by Tiong and Yong (2004) further indicates that Chinese cultural background centres on relationships and interaction, such as relationships between teachers and students or among students themselves. On the contrary, Western cultures that value individualism would promote self-efficacy, individual responsibilities and personal autonomy (Brennan and Durovic, 2005). Some of the differences between Collectivism and Individualism in a society, from a student/teacher interaction perspective, include the following summarised in Table 3.1 below.
Table 3.1 Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction related to the Collectivism versus Individualism dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLLECTIVIST SOCIETIES</th>
<th>INDIVIDUALIST SOCIETIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• positive association in society with whatever is rooted in tradition</td>
<td>• positive association in society with whatever is “new”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the young should learn; adults cannot accept student role</td>
<td>• one is never too old to learn; “permanent education”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• students expect to learn how to do</td>
<td>• students expect to learn how to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• individual students will only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher</td>
<td>• individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• individuals will only speak up in small groups</td>
<td>• individuals will speak up in large groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• large classes split socially into smaller, cohesive subgroups based on particularist criteria (e.g., ethnic affiliation)</td>
<td>• subgroupings in class vary from one situation to the next based on universalist criteria (e.g., the task “at hand”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained at all times</td>
<td>• confrontation in learning situations can be salutary; conflicts can be brought into the open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face</td>
<td>• face-consciousness is weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• education is a way of gaining prestige in one’s social environment and of joining a higher status group</td>
<td>• education is a way of improving one’s economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• diploma certificates are important and displayed on walls</td>
<td>• diploma certificates have little symbolic value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• acquiring certificates, even through illegal means (cheating, corruption) is more important than acquiring competence</td>
<td>• acquiring competence is more important than acquiring certificates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• teachers are expected to give preferential treatment to some students (e.g., based on ethnic affiliation or on recommendation by an influential person)</td>
<td>• teachers are expected to be strictly impartial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hofstede, 1986, page. 312

A study carried out by Cortazzi and Jin (1997), comparing the values of British and Chinese educational systems, has shown similar interpretations of the differences explicitly in relation to the ‘individualism versus collectivism’ dimension and the ‘power distance’ dimension categorised by Hofstede. There are undoubtedly some fundamental differences in communication behaviour between different cultures. In an individualistic and small power distance culture, the focus is placed on obligation to
oneself, since freedom, social recognition and equal relations are valued (Jackson et al., 2006a). Therefore, communication is generally guided by an individual desire to fulfilling a task, goals and achievement. In other words, individuals from individualistic or small power distance cultures tend to communicate more directly on an issue, compared to individuals from a collectivistic or large power distance culture such as that of the Chinese. Individuals from a collectivistic culture focus more on maintaining a relationship than fulfilling a task. They place more emphasis on harmony and respect for power hierarchy and therefore their communication style tends not to be direct, so as to avoid confrontation. Further, according to Cortazzi and Jin (1997), British and Chinese students have different assumptions and expectations of student roles due to the underlying differences in values (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Expectations of British and Chinese students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BRITISH</th>
<th>CHINESE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual orientation</td>
<td>Collective consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horizontal relations</td>
<td>Hierarchical relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active involvement</td>
<td>Passive participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal explicitness</td>
<td>Contextualised communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker/writer responsibility</td>
<td>Reader/listener responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence of mind</td>
<td>Dependence on authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Originality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion, argument, challenge</td>
<td>Agreement, harmony, face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking alternatives</td>
<td>Single solution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical evaluation</td>
<td>Assumed acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cortazzi and Jin (1997)

Thus, Chinese students are more likely to expect the teacher to take on the role of a model, a transmitter of knowledge, an authority and a ‘parent’, while British students tend to view the teacher as a facilitator, organiser and friendly critic (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001). As discussed, collectivism has a significant influence on the
behaviour, response and expectation of the Chinese students and as these students
grow up in such a close-knit society, it is worth exploring the family structure in which
they are brought up.

3.1.3 Structure in the Chinese Family

Values in Confucianism are seen to be the foundation for achieving ultimate humanity,
stability and peace in the Chinese community and family (Zhou, 2002). Therefore, the
Chinese, in particular, have traditionally had a very stable family structure. According
to Leung (1998), the stability of the Chinese family lies within the Confucian teaching
on family relationships and the emphasis on preserving the traditional values in the
family. Unlike most Western cultures, which focus on independence and
individualism, Confucian teaching focuses on harmony and integration. Confucian
values emphasise compliance, obedience, respect for higher authority and the
concept of ‘filial piety’\(^1\) (Deutsch, 2006). As Leung (1998) and Liu (1986) have noted,
Chinese have a greater tendency to comply with rules or orders compared with
Westerners. In particular, Chinese emphasise uniformity (Sun, 1983) and conformity
(Bond and Hwang, 1986), which is ‘manifested in and perpetuated by a single
curriculum and a uniform state examination for all’ (Leung, 1998, p. 28).

Moreover, obedience is another important teaching in Chinese culture, and so
children are taught at a very young age to obey their parents and teachers in
particular. As Chope and Consoli (2006) assert, for traditional Mainland Chinese
children, any forms of confrontation or disagreement with their parents can be taken
as a sign of disrespect. Therefore, unlike children from Western families, Chinese
children are less likely to defend themselves or argue with their parents, teachers,
seniors or a person of higher authority. Liu (1986) observes that when Chinese
children are drilled in the “respect superiors” rule at an early age, other incompatible
rules such as assertiveness and eloquence are simultaneously suppressed or
unlearned. Such is the reflection of the Chinese culture which focuses strongly on

\(^1\) ‘filial piety’ is considered one of the most important virtues in the Chinese culture: loyalty, respect and
obedience for parents, ancestors and teachers.
inequality in society, as China is identified as a higher power distance society (Hofstede, 2001). This is arguably one of the reasons Chinese students can appear to lack originality and creativity. It is also noted by Aguinis and Roth (2003) that Chinese tend to prefer implicitness rather than directness or confrontation in their communication. In other words, outspokenness is strongly avoided in the Chinese culture. This is illustrated by Murphy where he observed that ‘....Hong Kong students display almost unquestioning acceptance of the knowledge of the teacher or lecturer. This may be explained in terms of an extension or transfer of the Confucian ethic of filial piety. Coupled with this is an emphasis on strictness of discipline and proper behaviour, rather than an expression of opinion, independence, self-mastery, creativity and all round personal development.’ (Murphy, 1987, p. 43)

Nevertheless, despite these negative consequences, the ‘respect superiors’ rule can contribute to the emotional stability of an individual as well as family life and society. According to Liu (1986), ideally the rule is followed moderately rather than to its extreme (as in ancient China), so that verbal discourse and the flow of ideas will not be hindered and at the same time social stability is maintained. A controversial argument is that Chinese students these days may no longer subscribe to extreme forms of the ‘respect superiors’ and ‘memorise lesson’ rule, but the ‘practice skill’ rule is still strictly observed. Although some of the cultural values and teachings might not be followed as closely as in the past, the expectations of Chinese families towards their children remain strong and such expectations inevitably affect students’ learning. This is strongly evident in the work by Levinsohn (2007) who concluded that family is one of the key determinants of a Chinese student’s learning motivation.

### 3.1.4 Family expectations

In Chinese culture, education is conceived as very important, both internally (self-development and perfection) and externally (to achieve social status) (Lee 1996). According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), China’s National Bureau of Statistics recorded that in 2001, more than 60 per cent of Chinese families invested one-third of their income in their children’s education. As Ashley and Jiang (2000) explain,
Chinese parents believe that a good education will guarantee a better future for their children. Therefore, Chinese parents are most willing to make sacrifices for their children’s education (Shu and Carrasquillo, 1995). Moreover, Chinese parents often perceive a graduate with a foreign degree to have better skills and be more employable on returning home (Gareth, 2005). Since the views of Chinese parents and related parental control (Shek, 2007) often play the role in major life choices for their children, such as education and career (Tang, 2002), it explains the reason why Mainland China is identified as one of the key sources of international students for many countries (Fan, 2007).

Chan (1999) and Leung (1998) also observe that Chinese families have very high expectations of their children in performing well academically. Basically, students are judged based on their demonstration of academic performance and teachers, parents and other family members often place high and strict demands on the students, regardless of their actual abilities (Aguinis and Roth, 2003). This notion is supported by Zhang and Carrasquillo (1995), as well as Stevenson (1992). The high expectation from parents and teachers may induce tension and pressure on the children although, from a positive perspective, it reinforces motivation.

In his study, Stevenson (1992) found that Asian parents are much more involved and supportive of their children’s education than parents in America. The great expectations of Asian parents, and in particular Chinese parents, towards their children’s education can be seen in their child-rearing attitudes and practices. It is fairly common for Chinese children of preschool age to undergo intensive private home tutoring, so that when the child is of an age to attend school, she/he is at least comparable with, if not better than other children. Therefore, it can be said that the primary obligation, or in certain cases the only obligation of Chinese children, is to excel academically. Also Stevenson and Stigler (1992) noted that most Asian students see school as the focus of their lives, which is contrary to the view of most American students. In general, Asian parents put more effort in making the home environment suitable for their children to study compared to American parents.
Chinese children who fail to achieve academically and cause their families to ‘lose face’ are often classified as irresponsible. Among the Asian community, Chinese students in particular, try very hard to satisfy their family’s demands and expectations in performing well academically, as a way of obeying authority (Zhang and Carrasquillo, 1995). This is in line with the teaching of Confucianism, which emphasises filial piety (Deutsch, 2006). Therefore, Chinese have a tendency to seek approval from others, or in other words, they focus more on collectivist-oriented achievement motivation (Shi et al., 2001). Hence, if one is to show respect to the family, one will certainly strive to achieve academically, since academic success does not lie with one’s intelligence but with one’s effort. As such, Chinese students in particular are known to be highly motivated in their learning, so as to make one’s parents proud. Further, a student’s personal traits are another factor which would influence her/his learning. The following section considers the characteristics of Chinese students in their learning.

3.1.5 Characteristics of Chinese students
The classrooms in the Chinese environment are typically described as teacher-centred, with low observable rates of student participation, and such observations have reinforced the perceptions of Chinese students being docile classroom participants (Gan, 2009). Volet and Renshaw (1996, p. 205) found that some of the typical features of Asian students includes ‘….being respectful of the lecturer’s authority; diligent note-takers, preoccupied with fulfilling the expectations of the lecturers; uncritical of information presented in the textbook and by the lecturers; seldom asking questions or volunteering to contribute to tutorial discussion; and unaware of the conventions regarding acknowledging quotes and referencing sources and therefore unwittingly guilty of plagiarism’. As supported by researchers such as Borden (2003) and Lee (1996), the teaching of Confucius, which places high value on social harmony, is based on the ideas of mutual obligation, respect and loyalty toward
authority and hence the sublimation of individual ambitions and desire. This helps explain why Chinese students are seemingly less active in classroom participation.

Further, this quiet and passive learning of Asian students does not necessarily mean that they are unable to question, challenge or disagree with ideas or concepts, as they communicate it differently to those from a Western culture (Jackson et al., 2006a). Jackson et al., further explain that the silence of Asian students must not be misinterpreted as agreement with something. Instead, it could well mean that the student is reflecting or analysing information, or it may also mean that the student has total comprehension and understanding of the information but disagrees with the concept. In contrast, it is very uncommon for a Westerner such as an Australian to use ‘silence’ as a manner of communicating ‘no’. Communication by students tends to be indirect (Hall, 1976), characterised by formality and adherence to group norms, where the emphasis is not on what is said but how something is said. Therefore, consistent with the views of several researchers (Burns, 1991; Sealie et al., 1990), students would not question nor challenge the teachers, even when they make mistakes, as doing so is seen as an attack on the lecturer’s competence (Ginsburg, 1992). As noted by Watkins and Biggs (2001) and Gao and Ting – Toomey (1998), communication is to retain harmony among social groups, thereby reinforce role and status differences.

Hofstede (1986; 2001) states that some of the distinguishable attitudes of Chinese students toward education include their compliance in classroom behaviour and acceptance of the need to learn. Further, there is a Chinese saying that ‘those who know do not talk; those who talk, do not know’, and therefore the fear of ‘losing face’ also prevented students from participating. The ‘loss of face’ is a major concern in the Chinese society (Watson, 1999; Aguinis and Roth, 2003), as compared to the Western community. Face refers to ‘the confidence of society in the integrity of ego’s moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible for her/him to function properly within the community’ (Gao, Ting-Toomey and Gudykunst, 1996, p. 289). Therefore, to prevent the ‘loss of face’ or in order to ‘save face’, Watson (1999) observed some
Chinese students withdrew themselves from participating and subsequent learning. This notion is supported by Hellsten and Prescott (2004), who pointed out that international students who consider themselves not fluent in the English language are also generally reluctant to take part in class discussion. The tendency of Chinese students not asking questions nor clarifying their understanding of information in class for fear of shaming themselves or the teacher (Aguinis and Roth, 2003; Watson, 1999) could become a hindrance to their overall learning in a Western university.

Wong (2004) argued that the Western participative way of learning is less acceptable to the Chinese students, due to the fear of loss of face, shame and modesty. It has been suggested by Watson (1999, p. 358) that educators should attempt to alleviate students' fear of making mistakes in class and hence loss of face using the following methods.

- Nurturing and encouraging students' participation using positive reinforcement.
- Reducing the feeling of embarrassment when inappropriate questions are asked, by addressing or correcting the student who made the mistake using plural language. This would be an indirect means of correction to the class as a whole.
- Discuss and make known to students the educators' expectation of students participating during class.

The main aim in using the abovementioned method by Watson was to increase students' self-acceptance, self-confidence and self-esteem and pave the way to better student learning. Like Korean learners, Chinese learners are also less active in class activities such as discussion, presentation or group work (Han, 2005). Korean learners are very passive in their learning if the educator does not create the opportunity for them to voice their opinion or view, and does not display encouragement towards them. Chinese learners share these views. In other words, if educators offer Asian learners assistance and consultations after class, and show
patience and understanding of learning difficulties, these learners might be less passive in their learning (Han, 2005).

In addition, Chinese learners generally prefer group work and collaborative learning in an informal learning environment, for example, after the class. It has been observed that Chinese students ‘....may find it more comfortable to have a group discussion with peers or a lecturer after the class instead of asking the questions in the class, as they think that they might draw back the other students in the class and are scared of being teased because of their silly question’ (Tiong and Yong, 2005, p. 3). Further, Guy (2005) has pointed out that the Chinese students generally have a lower tolerance of ambiguity when compared to Western educated students. Studies also demonstrate that in the Confucian based communities, conformity is strongly enforced and students are guided by the concept of providing the ‘right answers’ (Hofstede, 1998; 2001, Brennan and Durovic, 2005). For students from the Confucian heritage, getting the answers right is the most important thing, even if at times they do not know why the answer is correct (Brennan and Durovic, 2005). Therefore, the Western learning culture and experience that promotes discussion and individual argument can be a daunting experience for Chinese students. Samuelowicz (1987b) has noted that only a mere 28 per cent of the surveyed Asian students in her study were familiar with tutorials and 18 per cent with any kind of group discussion. She further added that participation in group discussion is one of the most difficult adjustments overseas students must make in learning in Western universities. The discussion thus far has focused on the cultural background of Chinese students. The following sections will concentrate on students’ previous educational experience in China.

3.2 EDUCATION IN CHINA

To better understand the needs of Chinese students in the Western environment, it is useful to take into account the extent to which previous learning experiences in China may influence students’ behaviour and development as learners. As already discussed, education in China is greatly influenced by Confucius. In the Chinese context, education is a combination of two characters, jiao • •(giving knowledge) and
yu • • (cultivating person), which clearly portrays its ultimate aim in the traditional Chinese culture, that is to help students develop different capabilities. Quality education is always highly valued by the Chinese and hence a well-rounded individual should be good at etiquette, poetry, music, archery, horsemanship, drawing, calligraphy and numbers (Gardner, 1999). Chinese teachers are encouraged to vary their methods to approach students with different talents and to assist each individual in becoming a whole person (Cortazzi and Jin, 2001; Hu, 2002).

In China, the environment in schools is normally very formal, even in elementary level (Turner and Acker, 2002). The teachers tend to stand in front of a class of 40 to 50 students and teach for the whole session, while students are expected to listen without questioning. Further, students are trained from a very early stage by the Chinese education system to be very disciplined, taking notes and learning by heart or memorising materials taught in class. They are instructed to memorise and recite text since preschool and this continues on to primary and secondary school level. All this practice in memorising enables Chinese students to be more skilful in courses that emphasise memorisation. They are not taught nor encouraged to think critically; to be creative; nor to make comment or offer an opinion of their own. Thus, when these Chinese students step into a Western university, which very much aims to encourage innovation and creative thinking, they will usually experience confusion and disorientation and hence, devalue their educational experience. In the Western university, practices in class such as questioning, criticising, refuting, arguing, debating and persuading are very common but yet to most Asian students, it is a great challenge (Major, 2005).

In a study by Turner and Acker (2002), the authors plotted a set of educational values and practices from the United Kingdom (UK) system against Chinese student experiences and identified the gaps (see Table 3.2 below). As described by Gan (2009, p. 284), '....the current pedagogical practices in China are the product of the practical realities of educating large numbers of students with relatively few resources in an assessment-driven climate, combined with deeply ingrained practices influenced
by an enduring scholarly tradition’. Further, as pointed out by Hammond and Gao (2002), Chinese students’ classroom communication is influenced by a dialectic model of learning, which tends to be ‘fragmented, linear, competition-oriented, and authority-centred’ (p. 228-229). Dialectic education involves a teacher-centred approach, in which the students are required to memorise and reproduce the knowledge transmitted to them by their teachers in assessments. Such a teaching and learning approach differs significantly from that in the Western educational system. Moreover, as Chinese students are not brought up in the Western educational framework, the levels of academic adaptation they are required to undergo when arriving in the UK system is extensive (Turner and Acker, 2002). The same applies when they arrive at any Western educational context, such as in Australia. The overall approach of independent, self-directed learning, the lack of individual pastoral care and support available, student-centred methods and course assessments in the Western education system, are most challenging to the Chinese students (see Table 3.3 below).
Table 3.3 Chinese student experiences and perceptions compared with UK Higher Education attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese student - ‘model’ experience</th>
<th>UK system expectations about ‘model’ student behaviour</th>
<th>Perceptions about Chinese performance in UK Higher Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced in developing techniques for processing large quantities of data</td>
<td>Experienced in taking a critical approach to complex problems and literature</td>
<td>Experienced in rote learning and memorisation of data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students accustomed to individual-based approaches to learning and assessment</td>
<td>Students accustomed to working in groups and alone</td>
<td>Students do not make contributions to group work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students accustomed to expressing knowledge as unitarist ideas and factual truth; knowledge as conformity</td>
<td>Students’ understanding is achieved by reconciling conflicting opinions; knowledge as iconoclasm with the past</td>
<td>Students do not understand how to build an argument or reference; find it difficult to express complex ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examinations accurately measure academic accomplishment</td>
<td>Examinations are one of many different methods of assessment</td>
<td>Students poor at assessments other than exams; they do not take coursework ‘seriously’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture is the “expert” who conveys absolute knowledge and truth</td>
<td>Lecturer is a mentor who opens up the doors to reflective, independent thinking</td>
<td>Students ask lecturers to provide ‘all the answers’ to learning development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning happens to the young; maturity should bring understanding</td>
<td>Learning is a lifelong process</td>
<td>Students want to ‘get through’ their education; they want ‘all the answers’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The issues raised by Turner and Acker are reinforced by Andrade (2006), who noted that international students have difficulties adapting when they first arrive in a Western country. Studies by Ballard and Clanchy (1991a), Biggs (1990) and Samuelowicz (1987a; 1987b) have provided an indication of cross cultural differences in learning approaches and the possible likelihood of misunderstanding. Also, as observed by
Berno and Ward (2004), there are numerous factors which affect Asian students’ cultural adaptation in Western institutions, namely, English language, previous learning experiences, cultural values and beliefs, their conceptions of learning, personal characteristics and motivations. As such, it could lead to Asian students having lower levels of satisfaction with their overall learning experiences than students from other Western countries, as indicated in a national survey by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (Ward and Masgoret, 2004).

The work by Furnham and Bochner (1986) further supports the view that these students experience a range of difficulties that are most common to cross-culture travellers. These difficulties include insufficient linguistic and cultural skills, prejudice, discrimination, homesickness, loneliness, disorientation and depression. This notion is strongly agreed to by Brown and Holloway (2008), who explored the adjustment journey of international postgraduate students at a university in England. Beyond that, international students may also experience other problems that local students experience, such as academic challenges, stresses associated with transition to a new environment (such as university and accommodation), and identity conflict related to personal development in early adulthood.

Turner and Acker (2002) and Furnham and Bochner (1986) also observed that the extent of academic and personal stress that Chinese students seem to go through during their studies in the Western environment is likely to disadvantage them both personally and academically. In other words, Chinese students are very challenged, as they are confronted with cultural adaptation in all areas of life when they enter the Western education system, compared to Western students. For example, in China, student work is entirely individual and almost completely examination-based. From a young age, these students attend cram schools and examinations for them are the major determinant of entrance to elite schools. As examinations are a major part of students’ educational experience in China, the following section concentrates on how examinations in China are used and their significance in and influence on students’ learning.
3.2.1 Assessment in China

Lee (1996) has found that Chinese are willing to spend most of their free time in the pursuit of study because they believe that education will eventually lead to upward social mobility, fame and wealth. The extrinsic rewards were not just a perception but were realisable in traditional China. Lingbiao and Watkins (2001, p. 39) note that tertiary education represents ‘….a distinction line which decides whether they wear straw sandals or leather shoes later in their lives’. Generally, as evidenced in the earlier times in China, government officials and other role models of success were the ones that enjoyed many social and economic privileges. Government officials were selected through a competitive Civil Service Examination and only the brightest and most knowledgeable scholars could succeed in such examinations and ‘….the champions in the examination held at the central imperial court were granted high positions in the government (as high as the prime minister) and often granted marriage to the royal family’ (Cheng, 1994, p. 72)

The very first national examination system in the world was introduced in China (Leung, 1998). This Civil Service Examination started in the Han Dynasty (200 BC to AD 200) (Cheng, 1994) and was abolished around 1905. It was derived from the Confucian philosophy which held that government officials should be recruited on the basis of merit rather than family background (Hui, 2005; Cheng, 1994; Lee, 1985). According to Cheng (1994), ancient writings originated from the time of Confucius over two thousand years ago. Called the *Four Books and Five Classics*, they were treated like bibles in traditional Chinese schools from which scholars learned to self-cultivate to become gentlemen. Some of the *Four Books and Five Classics* include the *Book of Documents, Book of Poetry, Book of Change, Record of Rites* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and were referred to for solving political and moral problems (Lee, 1985).

In traditional China, there was no formal syllabus for examinations; however, for example, one was assessed on essay writing in which ideas and judgments were
based on the *Four Books and Five Classics*, which were regarded as all-purpose textbooks for all scholars for over two thousand years (Cheng, 1994). According to Lee (1985), students learned these works by heart as part of their formal education. Classics such as Confucius’ Analects were taught to children almost from when the child had become barely literate. Cheng (1994) further adds that the traditional education system in China is one of conformity and competition, where the emphasis is on ideas and social relations instead of practical skills: ‘….education was not meant for the learning of practical skills or applications in real lives. It was meant for success in examinations’ (Cheng 1994, p. 80).

Although the Chinese civil service examinations are no longer offered today, the intensity and focus on examinations among the Chinese has not diminished. At present, the national entrance examination in China, which has taken place every July since 1977, functions as the traditional Chinese civil service examination (Hui, 2005). According to Han (2005, p. 202), ‘….education was the key to passing examinations in order to become officials’. In other words, education functions as a means to success in China and examinations were the only path to changing one’s social status. Examinations in China are taken as an incentive for learning (Leung, 1998) and if there is no examination, then, one is not motivated to learn. When a member of a family passed the provincial examination (ranked as the third out of four levels of the examination system with the first level being the highest level), his entire family would be able to enjoy respectable social status and privileges as the family of a scholar, which is a lifelong title (Hui, 2005). The higher the level of the examination the student can pass, the higher the level of social status one can command and scholars were categorised as being in the uppermost class in ancient times in China (Leung, 1998).

Therefore, even in Chinese society today, ordinary people are driven by these forces to excel; it motivates them to study hard not only for themselves, but also for their family and for their teachers. As Chinese culture is based firmly on a collectivistic view rather than an individualistic view as in the West, it can be very motivating for Chinese students to achieve for the family. Hence, families and groups are said to be the
vicarious partners in the success and failure of the children (Salili, 1996). Lee (1996, p. 28) has highlighted that the focus on education ‘….rests upon the Confucian presumption that everyone is educable’. Further, Confucius did acknowledge that there are differences in intelligence, but ‘ …that does not inhibit one’s ability to be educated, but the incentive and attitude to learn does’ (Lee, 1996, p. 29). In the Confucian tradition, the intrinsic motivation of learning lies in ultimate human perfection, where learning is for the sake of oneself (Watkins and Biggs, 1996). Confucians do believe that not only is everyone educable, but they are also perfectible. The ultimate human perfection is the fundamental value of education. An ideal example of Confucian teaching is where a person should seek internal establishment (perfection within) and external performance (a government office position without) and both internal establishment and external performance is the product of education (Lee, 1996).

Han (2005) further observes that when one has the aim to reach a prestigious social status, hardship or suffering associated with learning should be tolerated. According to the traditional Chinese attitude, studying and learning is a hardship and one must pay the price to succeed. This is why Chinese are able to survive and excel in the fiercely competitive examination environment in China and focus strongly on examinations wherever they may be (Leung, 1998). In short, the cultural beliefs of Chinese are part of the reasons why Chinese are usually seen to be motivated and focused in their studies. According to a study by Volet and Renshaw (1996), international full-fee-paying students such as Singaporean Chinese were found to be motivated to perform well in their studies, in order to show their family that their financial support is well invested.

In addition, Turner and Acker (2002) observe that the form of examinations in China is typically factually based, with extensive use of multiple choice questions. Further, it is interesting to note that writing, in the form of how to style, structure and present a piece of writing, is not taught in China. Students, therefore, are unlikely to have encountered essay writing to any extent, certainly not written assignments of the
challenging 3,000 to 5,000 words typical in many undergraduate courses in the Western environment. In addition, there are differences in the academic writing styles between different cultures. In many instances, the expected Western writing styles might not be clearly communicated to students from China, due to the ignorance on the part of Western educators.

In Western academic writing, the structure resembles a diamond shape where one starts with specific ideas and then goes broader. However, in many Asian cultures such as in China, ‘....the expected writing structure resembles an inverted triangle where one starts broad and then narrows down to the more specifics’ (Mackinnon and Manathunga, 2003, p. 137). Therefore, such differences in the writing styles might confuse and frustrate the inexperienced Chinese students. This is especially the case when the Chinese students are not aware of the differences in the first place, or the Western educator ignorantly assumes that all tertiary students are trained in the Western writing style. Such presumptions by academic staff are further emphasised by researchers on plagiarism, such as Gullifer and Tyson (2010). In other cases, some Western educators might not even be aware of writing styles other than their own and hence become insensitive in providing guidance to international Asian students.

Turner and Acker (2002) also observe that the teaching methods and assessment in China emphasise the correct memorisation and reproduction of a lecturer’s notes or textbook information. In other words, remembering information content is more highly valued and rewarded through the assessment system than reflection on the value of the content of the data itself (Chan and Drover, 1997). Research by Watson and Biggs (1996) also provides support for the argument that examinations in Asian schools typically emphasise accuracy in the reproduction of information content.

In order for students to perform well academically, educators play a key role in students learning, and this is particularly the case in the Chinese context. The next section focuses on the role of educators in the learning of Chinese students.
3.2.2 The role of the educator
Under the Confucian heritage, the role of the educator is to impart absolute knowledge onto her/his students, while students are expected to receive that knowledge without questioning it. The students are accustomed to receiving knowledge in a passive manner, as interactive methods of learning and teaching are rarely practised (Samuelowicz, 1987a; Cortazzi and Jin, 1997). Generally, teachers are expected or perceived to have all the answers. It very much resembles the practice of a master/disciple relationship, where the master’s knowledge is expected to be unquestioned and unchallenged by their disciples. Similarly, in other Asia countries such as Japan, the teachers’ role is accorded great respect and students relate to their teachers with a kind of veneration which leads to a humility-type of learning approach (Ginsburg, 1992). Therefore, if these students volunteer either questions or an answer, it may denote a lack of respect for the teacher. In most Asian countries, if students challenge, question (for reasons other than clarification) or argue with their teacher, it is viewed as attacking the teacher’s competence. According to Samuelowicz (1987b), this excessive regard for authority by Asian students towards the teacher leads to their readiness to accept all that they are taught without questioning and most often expecting the teacher to give the “correct” solutions to problems. However, this passive role (receive knowledge without questioning) of Chinese students can at times lead to assumptions by Western educators that Chinese students are silent, spoon-fed recipients, rather than active, responsive seekers of knowledge (Han, 2005). Volet and Pears (1994, p. xii) have found that some Asian students (undertaking TAFE courses) find it most difficult and were ‘….worried to give the wrong answer in front of the class’ and ‘….feeling shy to ask when something is not understood’.

3.2.2.1 Small power distance versus large power distance
Power distance, as identified by Hofstede (1998, 2001) is one of the underlying reasons of the passive learning by the Chinese students. China is known to be a ‘large power distance society’ (Aguinis and Roth, 2003). Hofstede (1986, p. 313)
defines it as ‘….a culture where less powerful people in a society accept inequality in power and consider it as normal’. As such, cultural groups such as Chinese who score high on power distance tend to obediently accept the views without questioning of those who are in positions of authority. Some of the common characteristics of a high power distance society include high inequality between the teacher and student, stricter discipline to reinforce inequality and the practice of a teacher-centred approach in education (Hofstede, 2001). Brennan and Durovic (2005, p.5) state that, ‘….in a high power distance culture, teachers are treated with respect. There is supposed to be a strict order in the classroom. Teachers are expected to initiate all communication, and students speak up only when invited. Thus, challenging, criticising and actively discussing are not easy for Chinese students’.

High power distance society is also clearly reflected through the concept of filial piety, one that has always been a vitally important concept for a Chinese and it refers to a hierarchical relationship of social roles such as father to son, husband to wife, older brother to younger brother, and one who is more senior in age has more authority to one who is younger (Hofstede, 1986). In Chinese culture, students are not only taught to respect and honour authority figures but also to fear them and teachers are classified as authority figures, second only to students’ parents. Such a relationship is part of the influence of Confucian values (Chan, 1999; Heffeman et al., 2010) and it is hierarchical. Examples in the educational context are summarised in Table 3.4 below.
Table 3.4 Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction related to the Power/Distance dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SMALL POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES</th>
<th>LARGE POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>stress on impersonal “truth” which can in principle be obtained from any competent person</td>
<td>stress on personal “wisdom” which is transferred in the relationship with a particular teacher (guru)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a teacher should respect the independence of his/her students</td>
<td>a teacher merits the respect of his/her students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student-centred education (premium on initiative)</td>
<td>teacher-centred education (premium on order)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher expects students to initiate communication</td>
<td>students expect teacher to initiate communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher expects students to find their own paths</td>
<td>students expect teacher to outline paths to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students may speak up spontaneously in class</td>
<td>students speak up in class only when invited by the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students allowed to contradict or criticise the teacher</td>
<td>teacher is never contradicted nor publicly criticised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effectiveness of learning related to amount of two-way communication in class</td>
<td>effectiveness of learning related to excellence of the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outside class, teachers are treated as equals</td>
<td>respect for teachers is also shown outside class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the student</td>
<td>in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>younger teachers are more liked than older teachers</td>
<td>older teachers are more respected than younger teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hofstede, 1986, page. 313

3.2.2.2 Availability of teachers

According to Hui (2005), Chinese teachers are willing to use their spare time to help students in their learning as well as personal problems, whenever it is needed. Hence, such acts of helpfulness and availability of the teachers actually reinforces their roles and consolidates their status as teachers to be respected. Therefore, as Hui (2005, p. 27) further explains ‘....Chinese students are expected not only to pay respect to teachers in class, but also to the material that teachers have taught them.’ In other words, teachers can expect students to be attentive and be able to demonstrate good
memorisation whenever it is required. Besides, as Chinese culture is centred on obedience and hence, teachers have the right and authority to expect such behaviour from the students.

Biggs (1996a) further observes that in Chinese universities, both students and teachers live on campus and often in the same building and hence it facilitates much teacher-student interaction outside the classroom. Although, unlike in the West, teacher student relations in the Chinese culture are strongly hierarchical, they are ‘….typically marked by warmth and a sense of responsibility on both sides’ (Biggs 1996a, p. 56). Turner and Acker (2002) also found that the personality of the educator is an extremely important factor in determining the positive or negative motivation of the individual students. According to their study, lecturers in China are generally available to students, have low teaching hours and often few academic responsibilities. This is also noted in the study by Cheng (1994). Similarly, Stigler and Stevenson (1991) also observed that American teachers generally have longer working hours and work-loads compared to Chinese teachers at elementary level.

In China, more students are allocated to each class and as the same number of teachers is maintained in the school, all teachers have fewer teaching hours (Stigler and Stevenson, 1991) and hence have more non-teaching time to interact with students after class. Therefore, students are accustomed to finding staff ready, willing and able to talk to them privately and at length, without an appointment. Students and lecturers may have dinner together, go out together and develop close personal mentoring relationships, very much reflecting the Confucian master/disciple tradition (Cheng, 1994). Therefore, if the above-mentioned qualities are so important for Chinese students in their learning back in China, how are Australian (Western) universities able to meet the needs of these Chinese students?
3.2.2.3 Ignorance of Western educators

According to Hui (2005), most Australian educators are ignorant and unaware of the patron-like role that Chinese students expect them to play. Further, the widely practised student-centred learning in a Western university is foreign and unfamiliar to Chinese students who are brought up with a teacher-directed environment. Therefore, it is only natural to expect misunderstanding and confusion among Western educators and their Chinese students regarding study approaches. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) observed that Chinese students often find themselves in a dilemma when asked by Western lecturers to read a large amount of readings, ‘to read them all or just to read some? To read them all is too difficult; but to read some means making selections which is also difficult; in China, the teacher or someone will tell you what to do and what not to do’ (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998, p. 223).

Such a problem was also observed by Samuelowicz (1987b) in her study where she pointed out that, in general, overseas students needed more supervision and direction compared to Australian students. Malcolm (1995) also found that when the Chinese student is left on her/his own to make a decision on her/his study, the first person the student expected to obtain help from is her/his Australian lecturer, who, according to Chinese culture, should be most willing to help. However, the Australian lecturer might not have realised and understand the learning difficulties of the student. According to the lecturer’s experience, once students reach tertiary level, they should be immersed in a student-centred approach and have ways to tackle their own learning difficulties (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998). Moreover, given the education system in China, Chinese students would naturally expect their lecturers to not only transmit knowledge, but to be available to help outside the classroom. When this is not the case (which is now often the situation given the deterioration in student staff ratios in Australian universities in recent years and the pressures now to research and publish), this is then often misinterpreted and misunderstood by Chinese students as the lecturer avoiding her/him, ignoring her/his desire for learning and even as not caring that she/he has come all the way to Australia to study at her/his own expense (Malcolm, 1995).
Therefore, it is important for the educators to understand that the Chinese Confucian education system comprises very diverse and complex cultural practices from those in the Western countries such as in Australia. Ryan and Louie (2007, p. 10) advise that, ‘….rather than taking either a ‘deficit’ or ‘surplus’ view of either Western or Confucian education, teachers need to recognise this diversity and complexity within not only other cultures, but their own. Teachers need to become ‘anthropologists’ of their own culture in order to understand how the normative assumptions underpinning their teaching practices can be problematic for international students or indeed, for other groups of students’.

In summary, this chapter has considered the key influence of Chinese culture, namely Confucianism and the impact it has on students’ learning. It also provided a general overview of the educational environment in China as background information to understand the learning behaviour, perceptions and responses of Mainland Chinese students towards their learning.
Chapter 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 RATIONALE

Ramsden’s original model was developed based on data obtained from students of an Anglo-Saxon background in an English institution. Although this study uses Ramsden’s model, it differs from it as the current study is based on data obtained from Mainland Chinese students studying in Australian universities. As discussed in an earlier chapter, students’ previous educational experience in an Eastern society can be vastly different from that of a Western society and hence, a student’s orientation to studying can be greatly impacted by her/his previous educational and cultural experience. Likewise, the approaches to learning and ultimately study outcomes are largely dependent on the interpretation of the context of learning by individuals. It has been observed that interpreting the experience of one culture based on the beliefs of others may lead to inaccurate conclusions (Vogt et al., 2004).

The background and the prior educational experience of the participants in this study differ from those of the Anglo-Saxon students used in Ramsden’s original study. In this study, Ramsden’s model is used to include variables of interest such as teacher/student relationship, workload and English language, all of which are considered important to the Mainland Chinese participants in this study (see Figure 4.1). Given that learning is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1987), this study considers the influence of students’ previous educational experience and subsequently their perceptions of the learning context in Australia on their learning and how they respond to such perceptions. This study does not examine the “approaches to learning” nor “learning outcomes” in Ramsden’s model. The focus of this study is on the previous educational experience and the context of learning as shown in Figure 4.1 below.
This study seeks to understand how the learning context in Mainland China influences the experience of Mainland Chinese students’ learning as they then adapt to their tertiary studies in Australia. The contribution to the literature from this study is that it investigates the previous educational experience used in the Ramsden model in a Mainland Chinese cultural context. It then observes the experience of the Mainland Chinese students as they adapt their perceptions of the context of learning to the changed requirements they face as they pursue their studies in a Western cultural environment in an Australian university.

### 4.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The lack of research on the inseparability of the educational background in China and the culture issues Mainland Chinese face in adapting to the learning context in Australian Universities, forms the motivation for this study. The study thus aims to contribute to the literature as outlined above and to answer the following questions:
How do Mainland Chinese students perceive the learning context in Australian universities, given their previous educational experience in Mainland China?

How do they respond to the new learning context in an Australian university?

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Mainland Chinese students are denoted as those who hold Chinese citizenship and are of Chinese descent, having been born and lived in Mainland China for most of their lives. It also specifically excludes Chinese students from Hong Kong. Further, the participants have never studied in any other country other than in China prior to coming to Australia for their tertiary education. In other words, all the participants have had their preschool, primary years, middle school and high school education in China before embarking on the current educational experience in Australia.

4.3 ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Ontology is commonly referred to as ‘the form and nature of reality’ (Guba and Lincoln, 2004, p. 21) while epistemology is ‘the relationship between the knower and known (the researcher and the participant)’ (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009, p. 89). In this study, the nature of reality is not considered to be static and distinct but rather as objective, always emerging and transforming (Roberts, 2003). Reality is socially enacted through social interaction and once constructed, it reciprocates. According to Turnell (2007), meaning is generally conveyed through dialogue and action and within dialogue and action are embedded understanding, experience and emotion. As discussed, this study explores Chinese students’ perceptions about and experiences of learning in the Australian context. Given the personal nature of this experience, the research is influenced by an understanding of knowledge as shaped by the participants’ views of the reality of that experience. In other words, the knowledge that participants present in this study will be enacted, in part, through their interaction with the researcher as viewed through social constructionism.
Social constructionism, as an epistemological framework, has its origins in Kelly’s (1955) personal construct theory. Assuming that individuals construct their own realities (Patton, 2002) through interacting, experiencing and interpreting external events and influences (Laragy, 1996), this framework has developed legitimacy within the social sciences over the last three decades (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Schwandt (2000, p.197) asserts that this can be seen as quite a conventional perspective, if it is accepted that ‘the mind is active in the construction of knowledge’. This view further argues that the construction and understanding of knowledge will be formed by one’s social, cultural and historical environment. As observed by constructivists such as Roberts (2003), Leont’ev (1978) and Vygotsky (1987), it is contended that the truth or reality is multiple, it is mentally and socially constructed (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, 2005; Guba and Lincoln, 2004), continually ‘in motion….unfinished and ever-evolving’ (Roberts, 2003, p. 170). When it comes to methodology, the constructivists demonstrate a more hermeneutical and dialectical purpose in their approach to research (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Unlike the experimental tradition in natural sciences that follows a sole model of rationality and after a universal ‘truth’, the hermeneutic view gathers that the world is neither stable nor uniform and therefore, knowledge is concerned with ‘interpretation, meaning and illuminations’, and contents that ‘all human actions are meaningful’ and hence need ‘to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices’ (Usher, 1996, p.18).

4.4 METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research approach undertaken in this study is most suited to studies that look at the existence of deep and hidden meaning structures; cover the idea of truth in society; and explore the life world of human beings as it is experienced individually (Fink, 2000), in this case, by Chinese students from Mainland China. As argued by Shimahara (1988), human behaviour is formed in context and hence events will not be adequately understood if isolated from their context. The context of investigation should not be contrived or constructed or modified; context is natural and therefore must be taken as found (Shimahara, 1998). The goal of qualitative research
is not verification of a predetermined idea; instead it is about discovery that leads to new insights.

Freebody (2003, p. 125) states that ‘….qualitative research approaches have been aligned with a notion of subjectivity, they are sometimes offered as means of recognising or ‘capturing’ the unpredictabilities, idiosyncrasies and quirkiness built into the experiential ‘life-world’ of human beings. Glesne and Peshkin (1992, p. 2) further define qualitative methodology as ‘….supported by the interpretive paradigm, which portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever-changing’. Silverman and Marvasti (2008) emphasise that an important value of qualitative research design is that it permits greater flexibility than in most quantitative research designs. Some of the benefits of conducting qualitative research as discussed by other researchers such as Hammersley (1992, p.125) includes the following;

- It is relatively flexible.
- It studies what people are doing in their natural context.
- It is well placed to study processes as well as outcomes.
- It studies meanings as well as causes.

In supporting the value of qualitative research such as its openness, Glesne and Peshkin (1992, p. 3) claim that ‘….the openness of qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to approach the inherent complexity of social interaction and to do justice to that complexity, to respect it in its own right. Qualitative researchers avoid simplifying social phenomena and instead explore the range of behaviour and expand their understanding of the resulting interactions’. Silverman (2006, p. 5, p. 351) further emphasise that the strength of qualitative research is its ability ‘….to get under the surface in order to understand people’s perceptions and experiences’ and to ‘….analyze what actually happens in naturally occurring settings’. He points out that the greatest strength of qualitative research is that it specifically applies where the researcher sets out to record faithfully the ‘experiences’ of some, usually disadvantaged groups (Silverman, 2006, p. 5). As Richardson (2000) noted,
qualitative research studies should be introduced in such a manner that via the process of reading the research, the reader would gain new understandings, as ‘….its meaning is in the reading’ (p. 924).

The qualitative method is unlike the quantitative approach, which is concerned with ‘….measurement, experimentation, variables, and operationalisation, to transfer the original “voices” of its research subjects into statistical data, mathematical relations, or other abstract parameters’ (Schratz, 1993, p. 1), and hence leaving little comprehension of the context in which the particular practices occur. In contrast, the qualitative approach, such as through the use of focus groups and interviews, assists in capturing those experiences that ‘….cannot be meaningfully expressed by numbers’ (Berg, 1995, p. 3). Minichiello et al., (1990, p. 5) have further emphasised that, qualitative research is a technique which ‘….attempts to capture people’s meanings, definitions, and descriptions of events’. Using qualitative research such as in an interview, the investigator can follow and interpret one’s feelings and motivations in a way that is impossible when using quantitative method such as a questionnaire survey. Moreover, the investigators are able to develop and clarify participants’ responses during interviews. In order to obtain more detailed information than that obtainable with the use of quantitative method, a qualitative lens was employed in this study to explore Chinese students’ perceptions, experience and how they deal with learning in the unfamiliar and foreign educational context.

4.4.1 Focus groups
This study used a structured focus groups approach. Structured approaches are appropriate when the researcher is focused on specific subject matter (Morgan, 1996). Open-ended questions were used for the focus group discussions, because such questions allow people to talk comfortably and encourage them to generate much information through discussion (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). Focus group approach was adopted in this study as it was deemed appropriate given that its purpose is to ‘….identify the spread of opinions and feelings on the issues without attempting to resolve the issues’ (Basgen and Blunden, 2004). According to Madriz (2000), focus
groups are collectivist data collection methods that gather the multivocality of participant's perceptions and experiences to the research process and hence serve the objective of this study.

Focus groups are commonly adopted to seek understanding of the views of the participants such as in the work by Gullifer and Tyson (2010) in exploring university students’ perceptions of plagiarism. Focus groups were also used in the study by Tan and Simpson (2008) to evaluate overseas educational experience of Chinese students and the research by Bodycott (2009) to understand what Mainland Chinese parents and students rate as important when choosing a higher education study abroad destination. As Krueger (1988, p. 18) observes ‘….the focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures’ and ‘….the participants in a focus group are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topics of the focus group’. The use of focus groups is particularly important and beneficial in this study, as it facilitates in depth discussion of participants’ perceptions of their educational experience, needs and concerns in a permissive and non-threatening environment. Such an approach was used by Lizzio et al., (2002) to investigate the course experience of students in areas such as workload and assessment. More importantly, the choice of using focus groups instead of individual interviews in this study is to address possible issues such as the nature of recall about schooling experience within Mainland China, for students who are in their second or final years. In this regard, a focus group can enable interactions among the participants and hence the recollection or reconstruction of their previous educational experience in China.

Focus groups, as a qualitative tool, have weaknesses and strengths. Morgan (1996) linked the weaknesses of focus groups to the method that the moderator uses in gathering the data, and the influence of the group itself upon the data. The researchers have less control over the data produced than in individual interviews (Morgan, 1988). More precisely, the moderator in a focus group has to allow the participants to chat with each other, raise questions and express doubts and views,
while having limited control over the interaction other than ensuring that the participants are focused on the topic. Another weakness of focus groups involves the willingness of the participants to discuss sensitive information effectively in groups. For example, issues such as sexual behaviour (Morgan, 1996), personal information or sensitive matters that could be harmful to someone in the group (Krueger and Casey, 2000), affect individual participations, and do not allow them to chat openly and comfortably. Other possible limitations include the difficulty in assembling focus groups and it may be difficult to obtain a representative sample. It may also discourage certain individuals from participating, such as those who are not articulate or confident (Gibbs, 1997).

Despite these weaknesses, focus groups are considered to be a useful tool to gather qualitative data (Krueger, 1994; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1996). As asserted by Diambra et al., (2009), focus groups offer considerable benefits, as they enable the collection of data from a group of participants simultaneously, while at the same time provide an opportunity for observation of and interaction among the participants. Focus groups are acknowledged as a particularly useful research tool for several reasons (Creswell, 2005; Leedy and Ormrod, 2005).

- Firstly, time constraints are a common problem in group meetings and therefore, to maximise group discussion time, the interviewer or facilitator can follow a semi structured interview schedule which concentrates on highly focused topics or issues. It also saves time as several participants are interviewed simultaneously, while allowing the exploration of multiple perspectives.

- Secondly, as people are generally more at ease talking in a group, the structure offers an opportunity for genuine discussion among the participants ‘....that is concentrated on attitudes and experiences which are of interest to the researcher’ (Morgan and Spanish, 1984, p. 259).
Thirdly, the interactions among participants may be more informative compared to conducting one to one interviews, as it is easier to elicit responses from all participants and ensure that all who want to express their views can do so.

Finally, it is specifically effective when the participants identify shared features or characteristics among group members and hence the feelings of acceptance and relaxation would lead them to discuss issues openly. Further, it is relatively inexpensive to organise (Krueger, 1988). This cost effective approach is at times adopted together with other methods (both qualitative and quantitative); however, it may also be used alone or as the major methodological approach, as it is in this study.

According to Holland (2001), a focus group approach is also highly flexible and hence allows for unanticipated findings. As such, the data is often rich with the thoughts, feelings and concerns of the participants. Further, the technique has the ability to promote self-reflection, and hence it is especially well suited in this study where the voices, views, stories and reflections of Mainland Chinese students could emerge more freely in the discussion than in a traditional face-to-face individual interview. Moreover, unlike one to one interviews which can follow a very structured question and answer pattern, focus groups have the benefit of harnessing the “group effect” and therefore harvest a much richer range of experiences due to the group context. As Berg (2001, p. 115) states: ‘In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion’.

In addition, numerous cross-cultural researchers such as Triandis (1995), Tang (1996), Salili (1996) and Shi et al., (2001), have claimed and demonstrated that societies such as China, display a more collectivist orientated culture (Hofstede, 1986; 2001) than the individualistic culture of Western countries. Accordingly, Chinese students or individuals will only speak up in small groups (Hofstede, 1986) and
therefore a focus group approach is most appropriate to the participants of this study compared to individual interview, as they would feel more comfortable talking in a small group. According to Krueger (1988), a major advantage of using the focus groups approach is that it recognises and captures human tendencies or behaviour into the discussion. It does not merely assume that individuals really do know how they feel and that they are able to form views in isolation. It is not uncommon that individuals need to listen to the viewpoints of others before they are able to form their own personal and informed opinions. In addition, the quality of the data is enhanced as participants interact with each other (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Patton (2002, p. 386) further explains that ‘….participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other, which weeds out false or extreme views’.

Using open-ended questions, the focus group approach encourages participants to respond without setting boundaries and therefore enables researchers to gain an insight into the minds of the participants that might not emerge in other forms of questioning. This technique is particularly well accepted within marketing research (Morgan, 1988) where consumers' views are highly valued in order for an organisation to stay competitive in its industry (Krueger, 1988). It is also an effective tool in educational research practices (Williams and Katz, 2001) and it has been observed by Madriz (2000) that it is important the interviewer takes on the role of a facilitator and hence reduces the interaction between her/himself and the participants, and thus encourages the participants to engage with each other. That way, the influence of the interviewer on the focus group discussion would be minimised and hence allow more room for the voices of the participants to emerge and have more power to control the direction of the discussion. As Barbour and Kitzinger (1999, p. 5) note, ‘….the method is particularly useful for allowing participants to generate their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own vocabulary’.

Further, Krueger (1988, p. 25) suggested that before the commencement of the discussion, the interviewer may encourage both positive and negative comments by making a statement such as ‘….there are no right or wrong answers, but rather
differing points of view. Please share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. We are just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful. Typically, the size of the focus groups must be small enough for all participants to share their viewpoints and yet large enough to allow diversity of perceptions. According to Wilkinson (2008), the number of participants in a focus group can involve as few as two or as many as twelve participants. Morse (1994) indicates that the optimum number is between five to twelve participants, while Wilkinson (2008) believes the norm is between four and eight. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), a major disadvantage of having larger focus groups is that a few participants may dominate the discussion, while others may be reluctant to discuss their views or be shy and uncertain.

The targeted participants in this study were invited to 'discuss' or 'share ideas with others' at an appointed time and place. According to Krueger (1988), it is important not to use the term 'focus group' when invitations are made to potential participants; instead the term 'discuss' is used to convey the informal nature of the discussion. These discussions of ideas and perceptions by the participants should be obtained in a non-threatening, comfortable and often enjoyable environment for the participants. Therefore, participants are free to influence each other by commenting and responding to the views and perceptions in the discussion. Hence, data obtained in the focus group discussions may be more accurate in reflecting the actual views and perceptions of the participants, rather than merely pleasing the interviewer with their response. As such, it is argued by Krueger (1988) that focus groups interviews typically have high face validity.

In addition, focus group interviews enable the researcher to better assess if the participants really understand the questions posed to them. This can be done by posing some follow-up questions according to the response of the participants (Krueger, 1988). There is always a risk that the focus group data may not necessarily reflect that of the entire population. However, assumptions are made in all types of
research and hence the same is true of using focus group data to make generalisations. Nonetheless, the researcher must conduct the focus group interviews with care and appropriately analyse the data captured in making cautious generalisations to others who possess similar characteristics. In order to analyse the complete record of the focus group discussions, the labelled themes were collated into a qualitative software program called NVivo.

4.4.2 NVivo qualitative software program

NVivo is a commonly used software program developed by Qualitative Solutions and Research International (QSR) for researchers analysing qualitative data. According to Walsh (2003), the program is very useful in that it enables the keeping of many different types of documents together. The different types of documents such as interviews, field notes, memos, background materials, reflective essays, etc, can be linked together for easy access. Other benefits that Walsh (2003) found include the ability of the program in tracing the progression of one’s idea or early documents to the final piece of work or report. In other words, there is co-existence of earlier work with the final version. This is done by keeping a record or ‘log’ of all the changes, discoveries and/or significant steps in the study. These logs detail the journey taken and ultimately how the final report was arrived at and hence would assist to validate one’s analysis and strengthen its reliability (Richards, 2005). The records can be noted in a research diary or as a memo (reflective notes) that can be linked to other documents in the study. Further, one is able to import text, numerical data and graphics files from compatible software programs, besides creating new documents. The software program organises raw data from interviews, observations, etc. and provides a link to memos for researchers who wish to make codes and analytical notes, and then edit or rework ideas as the researcher progresses in the project (Bazeley, 2009).

The flexibility and organisational benefits of using the software reduce the difficulties of analysis of qualitative data. As a student of Walsh (2003) explained ‘…the coding system is a way of labelling certain aspects of your data and sorting the information
into distinctive categories. It is an easy way of keeping track of your ideas as well as
documents about specific topics. Coding lets you use words, phrases, and ideas
directly from the text and you can capture information about things (such as how
someone was feeling or when something happened) and explore them further when
you decide it’s time’ (Walsh, 2003, p. 254). With the help of NVivo, one can identify
common themes by reading the data sources over and over again, constructing
theories, validating patterns and also noting down one’s interpretations. The NVivo
software program is most suited for a research project such as this current study,
which has less than 300 documents, although other more sophisticated work such as
grounded theory and conceptual modelling may employ the use of the program
(Bazeley, 2009).

In setting up a project in NVivo, data are placed in different folders in the Navigation
Window for analysis. These folders are ‘Sources, Nodes, Sets, Queries, Models, Links
and Classifications’. Most of the data sources in qualitative projects are recorded in
text. Data documents, memos and externals are generally placed in the ‘Sources’
folder where data documents may be divided into interviews and focus groups, or
memos into theoretical and methodological notes. One is able to therefore write early
research design records and subsequently import them into one’s project as
documents or memos. Externals are other data such as books, photos, a video, or a
box of newspaper cuttings. This enables one to work with the literature and reference
it to books or articles, besides coding it and finding the relevant passages (Richards,
2005). It is in this ‘Sources’ folder that the entire transcripts of the various focus
groups of this research study were imported from a Word document into NVivo. When
importing these documents into the Sources folder, one has the option to code the
sources in a different Nodes folder (Bazeley, 2009).

Generally ‘Nodes’ folder is designed for the storing of ideas and coding (Richards,
2006). Basically, there are different folders for different kind of nodes depending on
the arrangement of the data or materials, such as Free nodes, Tree nodes, Case
nodes, Relationship nodes and Matrices nodes. In this research study, Case nodes
were created for focus group participants, in which all materials and/or information regarding the attributes of the focus group participants are stored. Nodes are generally able to hold all the answers to a particular question or store all data about a case (Bazeley, 2009). In other words, nodes are containers to categorise the topics and ideas of one’s project. They can store references to data segments regarding any topics or concept and hence consolidating the relevant data content for a question or reflection. Data are basically brought together by way of coding the segments at a node and the majority of the coding of nodes is interpretation of selected data (Richards, 2005; Bazeley, 2009).

As one progresses in the project, sources and ideas may be grouped in a ‘Sets’ folder, where one is able to compare different nodes (Bazeley, 2009). Sets are easily made and it is a very effective and quick means to gather data in groups and hence enable a more subtle and powerful process of analysis and searching. Moreover, one is also able to make queries in the ‘Queries’ folder and prepare diagrams and images in the ‘Models’ folder (Richards, 2006). Data items and content can also be linked up while attributes (such as age, background, gender, etc. of participants) and relationships are sorted and classified in the ‘Links’ and ‘Classifications’ folders respectively (Bazeley, 2006). When any folder is clicked, information in the clicked folder will appear in the ‘List View’, displaying all items stored in it. To further obtain the contents of any item in the folder, one may then click on the item and view the details in ‘Detail View’.

4.5 SAMPLE
The participants in this study were students studying the Bachelor of Business degree (majoring in Accounting) at RMIT University or the Bachelor of Commerce (Accounting major) at Deakin University in Victoria, Australia. The two universities were chosen because they are of comparable status, provide similar accounting courses and both have a large number of international students from Mainland China. The content of the accounting studies in both universities is fundamentally the same, with a similar minimal requirement of English using the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) entry score. Both degrees are accredited by professional accounting
bodies in Australia such as CPA Australia and The Institute of Chartered Accountants Australia (ICAA). All participants were full time students, with the majority of the students (77%) aged between 20 to 23. As the variation in age is not significant, the study does not analyse the findings by age. In total there were 26 participants as shown in Table 4.1 below. Of the 26 Chinese participants, 24 spoke Mandarin as their first language, while the remaining 2 regarded Cantonese as their first language and Mandarin as their second. The sample was ‘purposive’ (Kuzel, 1992) in that the participants in the study were predetermined on typical and common background traits. These were Mainland Chinese students who had all attained their primary and secondary school education in China and had no previous experience of overseas education.

With the focus groups, participants were grouped into 6 groups. There were 3 groups of Mainland Chinese students at each university and thus a total of 6 groups. The Mainland Chinese students were students in their first, second and final year of study in accounting at RMIT University and Deakin University. There were a total of 8 (30%) participants in their first year of study, 9 (35%) in their second and 9 (35%) in their final year. Of the 26 participants, 8 (30%) of them are male and 18 (70%) female. The gender split is relatively representative, as 60-70% of Chinese accounting students in Australian universities typically tend to be female.

The participants in their respective years of studies were selected from the University database and invited via telephone and email to participate in the focus group discussions. Nassar-McMillan and Borders (2002, p. 4) state that ‘….because of the practical necessity of conducting the groups locally, focus group participants do not constitute a random sample’. According to Morgan (1997), the homogeneity of the participants not only facilitates the discussion, but also facilitates data analysis. Therefore, the selection of the participants was intended to represent a given population, in this case, Mainland Chinese students. This was done after the list of students was filtered based on the country of origin. Only students from Mainland China were invited to participate. Further, participants from Mainland China include
only those who came to Australia directly for tertiary education. Those who had attended high school in Australia were excluded from the sample. This was done in order to obtain a clearer picture of the response or changes that Chinese students undergo during their transition from the Chinese medium education system to an Australian/Western education system.

Each focus group was targeted to have approximately five to six students. In order to cope with possible attrition, additional students were invited and later confirmed for the scheduled meeting. Therefore, approximately seven to eight potential participants in a focus group were confirmed via telephone a week prior to the scheduled meeting and reconfirmed again a day before. Unfortunately, some of the students who had accepted the invitation to participate in this study failed to attend on the scheduled day of discussion. Nonetheless, despite the lower than targeted number of students, the discussion went well, where students who turned up freely discussed their views. Table 4.1 shows the actual number of students who participated in the focus group discussions.

Table 4.1 Student distribution by Year and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RMIT Chinese</strong></td>
<td> </td>
<td> </td>
<td> </td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deakin Chinese</strong></td>
<td> </td>
<td> </td>
<td> </td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand total</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5.1 Data Collection

Students completing their second semester of first, second and final year accounting studies were selected. It was believed that, having almost completed the respective year of studies, the students would be in a good position to offer informed comment on the learning context which had influenced their way of learning during their year of studies. Figure 4.2 below outlines the approach taken for data collection.

Figure 4.2 Approach to Data Collection

With ethics approval and permission obtained, students’ details (name, student number, email address, year of studies, contact number, etc.) were obtained from the School of Accounting at RMIT University and the School of Accounting, Economics and Finance at Deakin University. Students were then contacted via telephone and email to participate in the study. All participants were given a plain language statement describing the research, what it involved and were also advised of their rights. The voluntary nature of the study was explained to the participants in advance. All focus group discussions were scheduled at a time most convenient to the participants and lasted from 60 to 180 minutes, which depended largely on the participants themselves.

Focus groups can be carried out in homes, public buildings, hotels, or even restaurants (Litosseliti, 2003). Whatever the location and time, the participants
should feel comfortable during discussions. To facilitate the interviews and to encourage participants to become freely involved in the discussions, the moderator should, early on in the discussions, take the responsibility of establishing an atmosphere of trust (Stewart, Shamadasani and Rook, 2007). In this study, focus groups discussions were conducted in a private interview room at RMIT University and meeting rooms at Deakin University’s library, to allow for confidentiality. In the scheduled meetings, semi structured discussion questions were posed to the group, allowing for a relatively free response and yet ensuring a degree of comparability. Each participant was encouraged to discuss openly and given opportunities to present her/his views. With the consent of the participants, all discussions were audio tape recorded for transcription purposes. Although video recording can overcome issues that arise when using audio tape recording, such as conversational overlap and identifying speakers etc, audio tape recording is preferred. This is largely because it enables a more relaxed environment for open discussion, as Chinese students in particular, can be intimidated by video recording which they view as too formal (advised of this by the Chinese students in the pilot group).

To mitigate the issues that arise with the use of audio tape recording, field notes were maintained throughout the study and to assist with identifying the participants during transcription. Basically, the initials of the participants were recorded accordingly and referred to during transcription in order to keep track of who has said what and clarify verbal contribution during conversational overlap. It also keeps an account of the types of group interaction and dynamics, besides recalling comments that are unclear on the tapes. By observing the cues and expression of the participants, it helps to reinforce the comments of the participants.

The focus group schedule (Appendix 2) was an adaptation of that used by Ramsden (1981) in his seminal research on the learning context. Prompts and probes were used to clarify students’ response (Kvale, 1996). The following outlines the kind of questions regarding the context of learning posed to the participants.
• Teaching. Participants were encouraged to talk about their personal experience of the teaching (method, pace, enthusiasm, attitude etc), the way they learn and how the teaching influenced their learning (if any). Students were asked to discuss their experience of the teaching back in China, as well as the teaching in Australia.

• Assessment. Participants were asked to describe the types of assessments (including freedom in learning, clear goals, standard, relevance etc.) they have experienced in their studies and comment on its appropriateness. They were also asked to discuss their way of learning with the given assessments. Chinese students were to offer their views on the assessments both in China and in Australia.

• Teacher/student relationship. Participants were asked to discuss their relationship with their teachers (frequency of contact, availability, how accommodating etc), how friendly (approachable, helpful etc) they perceived the teachers to be, and the impact of the teacher/student relationship on their learning (if any). Participants were asked to discuss their experience both in China and in Australia.

• Workload. Participants were asked to discuss their workload (number of lectures/tutorials, preparation time, assignments, homework etc). They were asked to comment on the appropriateness of the amount of workload experienced and how it affects their learning (if any). Participants were asked to discuss their personal experience both in China and Australia.

• English language. Participants were asked what they think the level of English proficiency is required to study accounting in an undergraduate program. If their English proficiency is below the level that they think is appropriate, how do they mitigate this in their own learning?
As mentioned above, the semi-structured focus group questions (see Appendix 2) are designed to discuss specific themes related to the context of learning and at the same time encourage and enable participants to express their views and experiences freely and openly. As suggested by Wilkinson (2008), attention was given to explore if the focus group questions were likely to engage the participants in discussion, and whether the questions themselves flowed logically and permitted different viewpoints. It was found via the conduct of pilot groups that the participants were engaged with the structure of the questions and were willing to openly share their perceptions and experiences. As a result, only minor amendments were made to the wording of some of the questions to improve clarity and reduce any ambiguous words or meanings. There were two pilot groups of final year students and each group consisted of 4 to 5 students in total.

It is important to note that the researcher can speak fluent Mandarin and thus the interviews with the students were conducted in Mandarin, the first language of the participants. This was based on the concern of Miller (2003) that English language is a barrier to productive communication with students whose first language is other than English. Miller (2003) further recommends that interviews with students be conducted in their first language where possible. In this study, the participants were generally delighted to have the discussions in Mandarin, so much so that a few participants commented during discussion that ‘….no one has actually cared enough to hear our views, we should have this sort of discussion more often..’ and as a result, the participants contributed freely. Therefore, conducting the focus groups in Mandarin is considered an advantage in this study, as it enabled the participants to comfortably and freely discuss their perceptions and experiences. In this way, it was possible to capture, articulate and develop responses in the mother tongue of the participants, which would not have been possible if the focus groups were administered in English. The ability to conduct the focus groups discussions in the students’ mother tongue would greatly assist the validity of the results.
4.5.2 Data Analysis

The Mandarin discussions in focus groups were translated literally into the English language and transcribed using Microsoft Word. All focus groups were transcribed to facilitate data analysis. It is important to note that transcripts are not an exact representation of the focus groups discussion. As Kvale (1996, p. 165) points out, ‘….transcripts are not copies or representations of some original reality, they are interpretative constructions that are useful tools for given purposes. Transcripts are de-contextualised conversations; they are abstractions, as topographical maps are abstractions from the original landscape from which they are derived’. Therefore, the transcription itself is an act of interpretation since the researcher interprets data in the form of word and sentences while transcribing (Kavle, 1996; Locke, 2004). When transcribing and translating, not all utterances were recorded, but all important and relevant comments to the discussion were noted. To determine what are the important and relevant comments, the recorded discussion was listened to repeatedly to discover what sections were important enough to be transcribed, which sections needed to be summarized, and which sections should be ignored. To ensure the accuracy and consistency of the translation, an independent party was sought to translate a sample of the transcripts back into Mandarin language. Once the accuracy of the transcripts was established, all transcripts were reviewed and coded accordingly.

The transcribed data were read through meticulously in search of common (the terms that were mentioned more than once across the groups) or contrasting themes and categorised accordingly. As already mentioned, the topic of the discussions was the perceptions of Mainland Chinese students regarding the learning context in Australia. Participants’ responses to each question were analysed with the purpose of identifying any words they used to describe their experience and learning.

The data were constantly compared in a coding process to recognise recurring themes (Merriam, 2002). Using NVivo software, themes or nodes were then created such as case nodes, tree nodes, etc. There were a total of 26 participants and hence 26 case nodes were formed. These case nodes contain attributes and information of
individual participants obtained from the questionnaire surveys discussed earlier. This information was used when analysing the coded data. In general, most of the data were coded as tree nodes with two 1\textsuperscript{st} level nodes called Australia and China, while the 2\textsuperscript{nd} level nodes were the differences in learning in the respective countries, including the context of learning such as teaching, teacher/student relationship, assessment, workload and English language. The 3\textsuperscript{rd} level nodes were the participants’ discussions of their perceptions and experience of the context of learning.

A written record of the focus groups of the participants at each university was established with the intention to analyse the data both at an individual university level as well as a cross university level, to tease out areas of similarity and differences in perceptions between students in the two universities. Analysis was also conducted based on year level, to explore any similarities and differences between students in their first, second and final year of studies. All nodes or categories were gradually refined for analysis purposes.

With the use of the NVivo software in analysing the coded data, it became apparent that the characteristics and experience of the Chinese participants at Deakin and RMIT universities are similar in nature, being fairly typical of what international Mainland Chinese students would experience in a university’s undergraduate Commerce degree. Moreover, in order to avoid any institutional bias and further improve the generalisability of the results, the participants from both universities were treated as a single cohort in this study (i.e., as one cohort student from Mainland China). As such, first, second and final year Mainland Chinese participants are identified as CY1, CY2 and CY3 respectively.

In short, this chapter has stated the research questions, considered the research design, justified the adoption of qualitative research method, explained the approach in data collection and discussed the use of the NVivo software program in analysing the data collected via focus groups. The findings from the focus groups will be discussed and analysed in the following chapters.
Chapter 5

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS – Perceived Context of Learning

The findings from the focus groups are described in this chapter and Chapter 6. This Chapter reports on the participants’ previous educational experience in China and their perceptions of the context of learning in Australia. In the following chapter, the influence of the perceived context of learning is presented and discussed.

As described by Smith and Zhang (2009), amongst a plethora of other influences, students develop their perceptions of learning from hearsay and personal experience. Following the assumptions that knowledge or learning is socially and culturally constructed, an individual’s experience of the environment is of great influence to her/his perceptions and thus this chapter commences with the participants’ educational experience in China and their views of the Australian learning context. The discussion is based on the elements depicted in Figure 4.1 in Chapter 4: teaching; assessment; teacher/student relationship; workload; and English language. The discussion is also structured to demonstrate how students’ perceptions change during their degree studies in Australia. This is done by considering separately the groups of first, second and final year students. As indicated in Chapter 4, first, second and final year Mainland Chinese participants are identified as CY1, CY2 and CY3 respectively.

5.1 STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE IN CHINA

5.1.1 Teaching
Generally, the teachers in China adopt a ‘stand and deliver’ approach in their teaching. They tend to stand in front of a class of 50 or 60 students and teach, using the blackboard extensively while students are expected to listen attentively and take copious notes. The teaching in China is seen as serious, formal, strict, highly rigid and textbook-based, with little room for creativity and where the learning is focused on exam performance. As is evident in the findings of this study, the students seldom
voice their views or opinions; they do not challenge their instructors; and generally are not very active in classroom participation. This is consistent with the literature; see for example, Hammond and Gao (2002) and Watkins and Biggs (2001) as discussed in Chapter 2.

Paying attention in class and following the guidance and instructions of teachers are seen by the participants in this study as some of the key success factors in doing well in exams. It was claimed by most participants that teachers in China were clear and detailed in their explanations, using good illustrations in class. The perception of high quality delivery by teachers in China was consistent among the students. If students paid good attention in class, it would not be necessary for them to read the taught-materials on their own after class. In other words, students would not need to undertake self-directed learning if they have concentrated well in class. Teachers would always give out practice exercises and directed materials to ensure that the students have grasped or understood the subject matter introduced in the class. The teachers were seen to be responsible, as they took the time to check that students understood the material taught. The teachers would normally walk around the classroom to ensure students were on track. They would follow up with students who have difficulties in their studies and spend time coaching them. In general, the theoretical aspects of the subject matter would be firmly grounded in class, while the practical or application aspects would require students’ commitment both inside and outside class time. Below are examples of the experience of learning in China, where the teaching is normally conducted in a formal manner and the emphasis is on ‘follow the leader’.

“The teachers would stand in front of a class and talk for the entire class, only occasionally asking students questions... students are normally not too active in participating... each teacher has their teaching materials or structure in which they follow most strictly, they cover a lot of things in the allocated time... forcing students to learn...”
– (CY1)
“The teachers would watch over you, guiding you in what you could do and what you could not. They would remind you on what to do and when to do things… they are full of patience but at the same time they are very strict as well. They teach in a very rigid manner, following the textbook very closely.” – (CY1)

“During lessons, we had to sit up straight with our hands on the table. That is to prevent students from doing other things and not paying attention in class. Students are not allowed to yawn… during class, you cannot lean or lay on the table to rest. You have to hide your sleepiness and pretend that you were listening attentively…”– (CY2)

“The teachers in China would give clear indication or stress on certain important issues and elaborate well with examples. They prepare well for classes…”– (CY2)

“There is a big gap between the teaching in China and in Australia; in China there will never be a time when our opinion is asked for. It is very uncommon that our views are warranted, like what we’re having now, a sit down discussion. The more common practice in China is, the teacher will say this is the way I teach, you just have to accept, learn and follow whatever I say.”– (CY3)

The type of learning expected of the students in China was characterised by the phrase “practice makes perfect”, where students were required to continuously attempt questions or exercises until they could master them. The quotations below capture the sentiment of the teaching.

“The teachers in China would teach and that followed with giving out lots of exercises to students. It was the same manner of learning, day
in day out. That gave me a kind of feeling that as long as I have attended the classes, followed the instructions of teachers in doing all the practice exercises, I would be fine.” – (CY2)

“The teacher would stand in front of the class and teach using the black board and thereafter we were given a lot of homework... we were required to do some questions or exercises during class and the teacher would walk around to each student and check if students are on the right track or have difficulties with the questions. This is not practised in Australia.” – (CY3)

“In China, the teachings are all done in class... there are no lectures or tutorials. They teach according to the textbook, each and every single page and chapter...” – (CY3)

The teachers would attempt to cram a good deal of information in each lesson, by rigidly following their teaching structure and materials, not wanting to omit any part of their teaching plan. When the lesson ended, the teachers would ignore the bell and continued on to teach as much as they possibly could. The teachers would go through the textbook in great detail. Further, students were forced to learn and digest the teaching through repetitive practising the exercises given.

“I remembered during lunch break where we normally have resting time, some teachers would attempt to compete with other teachers to continue teaching during those resting times. Or some teachers would drag her lesson, ignoring the bell as much as she could. There was no free or resting time for us at all.” - • CY1 • •

Further, punishment is recognised as part of the approach to teaching. Punishment is not only used to discipline inappropriate behaviour but it is also used to correct students who fail to meet the expectations of teachers. Punishment is widely accepted
by the community and parents of the students, to ensure students follow the instructions of the teachers. This is consistent with the traditional Chinese proverb that says “strict master produces quality disciples”; hence punishment is used throughout the schools in China. Culturally, teachers are highly respected and supported by students’ parents and hence they are given the liberty and authority to punish and correct their students when it is deemed appropriate.

“Teachers taught by calling out students’ names to answer their questions; if no one knows the answer, they would be punished by standing for the entire class. If the teachers think that you could not answer because you’ve failed to revise your work the night before, you will also be punished.” - (CY1)

“I feel that the teachers were rather strict… after classes, we were not allowed to go home; we had to stay back in class to memorise text or complete our homework. At times, the teachers would oversee and ensure that we actually did stay back in class to do our work.” - (CY1)

Most teachers in China would exert some form of pressure on the students in their studies. They commonly believed that through the pressure placed on the students, it would motivate them to excel in their studies.

“I feel that in China, the way the teachers put pressures on students in their studies is also good. At that time, of course it was very difficult and stressful and we hated the teachers but after that I felt that I have indeed learned something. The kind of forced learning and pressure were tremendously hard to withstand, very, very difficult times indeed.” - (CY1)

“Learning in China is all about non-stop practising the questions, over and over again. A few months prior to final exams, we would practice
answering the questions. The practice exam questions given by the teacher alone were that much (an indication of a huge pile), on top of that, you still have your own materials to practice on." (CY2)

Further, the teaching structure in China is so closely connected to exams that it is commonly called ‘education for examination’. In other words, students are taught in accordance with exam requirements and because of exam preparation, they are educated.

5.1.2 Assessment
Examinations are generally known as the only form of assessment in China and most of the teaching and learning are geared towards preparation for the final exams. Non-assessable tests and quizzes are given on a regular basis, to examine students’ understanding of each chapter or topic and to prepare them for the exam. Progressive or summative assessment tasks such as assignments, presentations or projects were not used. The homework submitted on a regular basis is not graded but undertaken to enable students to know where they stand in their understanding of the subject. The only graded piece of assessment is the final exam, which covers 100 per cent of the assessment. Some of the students also experienced a negative award system where marks were deducted as a penalty. If the total deduction of marks exceeded a particular margin, the students would be punished, which placed a significant amount of pressure on them.

A common complaint from the students suggested that they gained very little when the learning was exam-driven. As such, this approach to learning adds little value to students, other than achieving university entrance criteria. It was claimed by some students that they did not benefit personally due to the textbook-like manner of learning. They learned because they had to, not because they were interested. To further add to the mounting pressure of completing the allocated work and exams preparation, students’ academic transcripts which disclose all the results would at times be publicly displayed in the school notice boards for a period of up to a few
months, with the aim to encourage or propel (applying reverse psychology) students to perform well in the next exam. The thought of having one’s results in the open was intimidating, daunting and stressful for most students. Hence, not wanting to ‘lose face’ either personally or for the family, students would follow the instructions and teaching most rigidly.

“It was all about exams and results, some of our homework was graded but that did not contribute to our finals at all.” - (CY1)

“Yeah, nothing contributes to the final exams, we still had to work hard and do well in our finals regardless of how we have performed in our tests or homework.” - (CY1)

“In China, learning is purely for examinations. Therefore, teachers would only focus on answering for the examinations or practising past exam questions.” - CY2

“It was 100% exam based, every week, every month after each chapter and each topic. All other homework or exercises do not carry any mark or weight towards exam marks. We had mid term exam and final exam but the final exam is the most important of all.” - (CY3)

As such, students would listen and follow diligently the step by step guidance and instructions of teachers. Students are most familiar with exams as the only form of assessment and took it positively as feedback on their progress and understanding of the materials learned.

“I find that the endless form of testing and exams would enable students to evaluate their level of understanding. In the test, at times I did well and at other times I did poorly but at least I would know where I needed to brush up. If I lack understanding in certain areas which is
reflected in the tests it would be evident in the final exam too... although the endless amount of testing and exams are a pain but at least we would know at what level of understanding we have on certain area and would attempt to cover all grounds when preparing for the exams.” (CY1)

“...exams are good, you’ll be trained to structure your thoughts and learn to discuss. Further, if you did not do well in the tests or exams you would know that you need to learn up certain topics and hence, an indication to you that you need to seek help from the teachers. That way, you will be more equipped when it comes to the final exams.” - (CY2)

Examinations in China are arguably said to be the only reason why students study diligently. If one does well academically, the door of opportunity to a good career would be wide open. Therefore, in order to perform well academically, students follow teachers’ instructions most religiously. Most teachers give detailed guidance to students and at times advise students on the key areas of exams.

“Most teachers in China would guide students on the main points in the upcoming exams, instructing students to do such and such. Therefore, if you are to follow her/his instructions closely, you will be able to obtain good results.” - (CY1)

“The exam would dictate the learning styles, for example in Maths we just kept practising the likely questions of exams on a daily basis. The teachers would guide us as to what would be examined and which areas to concentrate or cover for exams and hence, we would attempt those questions repeatedly until we become familiar with it and make only minimal mistakes.” - (CY3)
Students put in an enormous effort practising the questions given by the teachers and it was through practice in answering those questions that students felt they learned. With science subjects, students generally would learn the theories by continuous practice in answering the questions and hence develop the skills to tackle the exam questions. With arts subjects, students would resort to memorising the materials for exams.

“Teachers would give out lots of materials and homework to be completed and it was through answering those questions that I learned. The mountain high amounts of hand outs were all teacher’ directed materials that we needed to practice and memorise.” – (CY1)

“In science subjects, it was from my own mistakes made that I was able to summarise the materials and think of possible solutions. At times, the teacher would point them out to us. Therefore, learning was a combination of the mistakes I’ve made and feedback from teachers. With that, I attempted new questions that were similar in nature and apply the new strategies that I’ve acquired. Lots and lots of practicing indeed, I revised my study every single night until almost 10 p.m.” – (CY2)

“...the teachers are extremely responsible... they would inform us what we needed to prepare for the following lesson in terms of what pages and how many pages to read... they would go over the texts in exceptional details and thoroughness. They would also draw up the revision schedule and structure for students in preparing for exams... therefore, as long as students follow the lead of the teachers closely, they will have no problems at all in their exams.” – (CY3)

Moreover, students would generally revise their notes, heed their mistakes and learn not to repeat them in the exams, while in some subjects, memorising the text is the
preferred option. This is supported by Hammond and Gao (2002) and Cooper (2004), who noted that one of the characteristics of Chinese education is memorisation. The emphasis on exams as the only form of assessment was also viewed as inappropriate by some participants in this study, especially in the acquisition of knowledge as it failed to equip students in the long run. It was seen as suitable for short term learning. Students claimed that they often memorise materials to be regurgitated in exam and right after exams, they would have no recollection of it all.

“The preparation I had for most of my exams was by memorising the materials… using short term memory, however immediately after I’ve sat for my exams I would not remember what I’ve learned or memorised. I memorised it last minute and purely for exams.” – (CY1)

5.1.3 Teacher/Student relationship
According to most students, the teachers in China were widely recognised as being responsible in their dealings with students. The teachers were approachable and actively involved themselves in their students' learning. Outside class times, both the teachers and students would socialise and have meals together and students had a close relationship with their class teachers (teachers in charge of a particular class), knowing them personally. The majority of the teachers were regarded by students as friendly and helpful, not just in offering guidance in their studies but also being committed to helping students in their personal lives or with other matters. With such a close connection with their teachers, it is not uncommon that the teachers are the first person students approached for help, often superseding their parents. Students also explicitly indicated that they were more obedient and respectful to their teachers than to their own parents. At the same time, it was highlighted that the teachers maintained their status by keeping a distance between the students and themselves, to reflect the different level of social hierarchy and hence authority. A teacher would always be regarded as someone who is higher in the relationship hierarchy and hence it was not possible to relate or communicate with teachers as normal friends. Students have great respect and trust in their teachers and thus most would confide with their
teachers, seeking advice and look on them as their mentor. Such ties display the master-disciple relationship as described by Confucius in Chapter 3. Below are some examples of how some students described the closeness of such a master-disciple relationship.

“...I remembered in our class there was a boy whose parents were separated, so during the weekends the teachers would invite us and that student to her own home and asked what that student’s favourite food is. She would happily prepare dishes and meals that the student likes and treated him really well. She treated all of us really well too, sharing with us the happenings in her life. That gave us the warm feeling that she was more than a teacher, she was like a mother to us.” - • CY1 •

“My teacher in charge was really good too, during weekends or school holidays, we would always visit her at her home and spent time in her place... at times, we went to the movies with her and her young son came along too. We were very close to that teacher.” - • CY1 •

“...it is an inborn instinct that teachers are higher in the hierarchy and one would never ever imagine that one could supersede the teachers in knowledge etc... likewise, the teachers would generally have the perceptions that the students would not be able to teach them in return. Just like in the relationship of parents and child. In this traditional Chinese culture, it is impossible to place both the parents and child on an equal level to discuss anything...” - (CY1)

“If the teachers are good (show care and concern) to you and put in a lot of effort in teaching and guiding you, in return you would also like to perform well in the exams as a form of gratitude towards the teachers as they would be most happy that their students did well in the exams.” – (CY2)
“We have lots of contact with the teachers, we know them personally and the students obey their teachers. They influence our learning and behaviour too, we become hard working and more willing to learn as they direct us in our studies and also set good examples for us to follow on how to live our lives…teachers are role models to students…” – (CY2)

“In China, the teachers and students have close relationship, they don’t only help you in your studies but if you have problems in your personal life or any areas, they will try to advise you or help you. If you have difficulties in other subjects that they might not be teaching, they would also be willing to assist you. Teacher would look after and be concerned for all students’ welfare. Even at present if we have issues in our daily lives we could still approach our former teachers for help or advice. For example, if our parents are not in talking terms, our teachers would be concerned and ask us the situation and we would still share openly with our teachers. That gives us a feeling that someone who is superior with knowledge and authority cares for us... unlike the lecturers here.” – (CY2)

“...for us in northern China, the teachers have parent-like kind of status, where we have to respect them and there is a hierarchy or authority. If you do well in your study, they would be proud of you but if you don’t, they would be very angry with you... meaning, they cared a lot for us in our studies, they were very responsible. Therefore, they were very committed in their teaching...” – (CY3)

After graduating from high school, the students would continue to meet with their formal class teachers for meals, movies or to catch up. As the Chinese proverb goes,
“teacher for once, parent for life”, which explained the close relationship or contact students continued to have with their former teachers.

“Even though I am no longer my ex teachers’ student, now that I’m here, I would still keep in touch with some of them. They continued to be very concerned about my well being over here. Whenever I return home to China, I would still visit them... they were in fact, our parents at school...sort of...while our biological parents are parent in other matters.” – (CY2)

“In China, I interact with my teachers on a regular basis and hence, our relationship is good. Even after I’ve graduated from high school, I would still go out for meals with them.” – (CY3)

Such close relations were only made possible because the teachers took the initiative to reach out to their students. The teachers were most willing to spend time with students outside class hours to assist them in their studies and the teachers were always readily available if they ever needed help; no appointments were required.

On a cultural note, the concept of discipleship, passed down from generation to generation, made it common for teachers to be greatly concerned with their students’ studies and personal welfare. Therefore, teachers would pressure students in their learning, ensuring that they would reach their fullest potential and have a bright future and career. With the close knit relationship they have with their teachers, students strive to excel in their studies in order to avoid disappointing their teachers and it is also a way of demonstrating their gratitude.

5.1.4 Workload

It was explicitly claimed by the students in this study that the study load in China was unimaginably heavy and at times unbearable. According to them, there were around eight different classes/subjects of fifty minutes each day taught by eight different
teachers, with only ten minutes break in between classes. The structured teaching alone would take up approximately eight hours each day and the remaining time would be allocated to homework time or at times, unstructured teaching, in which teachers continued to coach students in their studies outside normal teaching hours. Accordingly, all the teachers expect students to complete the daily allocated homework and hand it up the following day. Homework was mandatory, although it did not contribute any weight to the final exam. It was designed for students to recognise their mistakes and hence, not to repeat the same mistakes in the exams. With such demands from the teachers on students to seemingly complete almost impossible tasks, the students were often left with little time to rest, let alone free time for any other interests.

“…every teacher expects the students to complete the homework or exercises given by her and to regard it as the most important homework. As such, the only way for us to prioritise the homework was by assessing which teacher has the most authority or most fierce. That is to say, if a particular teacher punishes students more severely than another teacher, her homework would be completed first. In those instances, we had no choice but to be left with no time to complete the homework given by some other teachers who seemed to be more accommodating or less strict.” – CY1

“In China, we just follow along with the teaching, whatever they teach we just learn. Students would not learn extra on their own because what the teachers gave to students were already overloading on us. What the teachers allocate to students would either be fully loaded or over loaded, they will never under load the students. They teach a lot of things, so we could only receive what is taught to us as we absolutely have neither free time nor the capacity to do other things or learn other things on our own outside the classroom.” – (CY2)
"The work load in China is absolutely over the limit, say at least three times the load here in Australia." – (CY3)

There was no flexibility at all for the students, as their life was all prearranged for them without consultation. It was not unusual to have classes up to six days a week, commencing in the early morning until late in the evening. The amount of homework or exercises was substantial and at times seemed impossible to complete. If the students were to miss any homework, they would be most stressed due to the amount of work or back log they needed to clear.

“...lots of exercises. For example in Math, everyday we would be given two sets of exam questions to be completed and when there were mistakes, we had to rectify it and continue to practice with new sets of questions. Further, we were expected to use different manners in answering the same questions. Then the teachers would continue to give out even more questions to be completed each day.” - (CY1)

“...we merely follow what the teacher asked us to do, attending classes and do lots of practical exercises in class the whole day long. We hardly have time to do any self-study or have any free time.” – (CY2)

“It was not possible to complete all the homework given, by the time I reached home it was 11.30pm and I had to get up at 6am the next day for school, I didn’t even have enough sleep… I could only try my very best and do as much as I possibly can.” – (CY3)

The amount of workload was demanding, unreasonable and most stressful for some students who felt that it robbed them of their childhood. A student bitterly recalled his experience of the workload in China as follows.
“Everyday the teachers would keep telling us to read this and that, do this and that. We could not do any other things as the homework and readings were endless. Even when the long awaited public holiday approaches, the teachers would still announce it as a school day. Very painful and upsetting when my parents were at home enjoying the holiday I would still have to be at school. We did not even have time to play. Those who are good in their studies would not even want to come out to play.” – (CY1)

Some students believe that due to the amount of workload they have had, they are now stronger in Math, have greater memorising ability, more determined, could persevere and be more motivated in achieving their goals. These traits are seen to be fundamental and essential in learning.

“Despite the amount of workload we had, I think we have a stronger foundation in learning...we are ‘trained’ to work under pressure and could learn without ceasing, good concentration, memory and determination too.” – (CY1)

“I did not mean that we are better than the locals in Math... and although we could hardly use the advance Math that we have learned from high schools but it actually helped develop our thinking and hence enabled us to easily understand some accounting aspects of things... So when the lecturer skipped a step or two we were still able to follow, but not the local students. The local students would want the lecturer to demonstrate every single step and would be confused if there is a short cut. Therefore, I feel that we are trained in our thinking pattern and ability to understand things... although the workload was most stressful and demanding at that time”. – (CY3)
The findings suggest that the students’ learning in China is strongly affected or dictated by their teachers, as already discussed. The learning attitude adopted by the Chinese students in this study are found to be consistent with Confucian teaching, which focuses on effort, determination and persistency in learning, rather than one’s intellectual ability. The view is that learning would come naturally for students when sufficient practice was carried out via continuous attempts on practice exercises and homework. This is one of the reasons for allocating such a heavy workload on students and the pressure for them to complete their work on a regular basis. The belief in repetitive learning, where one would repeatedly attempt the questions or areas in which one is weak, is greatly emphasised by the schools in China.

According to some students, the learning in China was by force and students were pressured and pushed to learn certain materials in a rigid manner in a designated time frame. In fact, Chinese students did not have the opportunity to choose the learning approaches that were appropriate to them personally. Further, the magnitude of the workload that was expected of them made it difficult to be independent learners, as they were constantly pressured for time. The consequence of having too much to learn in too little time may have lead students to rely solely on their teachers, especially when the ultimate aim was to do well in the final exams.

“Concentrating in class is important, if you focus on the key points given by the teachers, if you follow teachers’ instructions as to which materials to memorise and you memorised them, you will surely pass the exams. You’ll definitely obtain high marks in the exams.”- CY1

“In China, the learning is purely following instructions, whatever the teachers want us to do or complete, we will just obey. There is very little opportunity to have a say at all.”- CY2
5.1.5 English language
Under the Chinese educational system, all teaching and learning are conducted in Mandarin. Therefore, students have limited exposure to the English language, the most being a single subject offered (only in certain schools), which focuses on the construction of simple sentences. Further, if English language is offered in schools, it is often taught by local Chinese teachers who might not be proficient in the language themselves. As such, most families who intend to send their children abroad for studies would have them attend private English tuition classes in preparation. However, the culture and schools in China still concentrate very much on using Mandarin as the medium for communication, leaving students with little opportunity to improve or practise the language.

5.2 STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS IN AUSTRALIA
5.2.1 Teaching
Only a few students reported a positive experience of the teaching, where teaching was viewed as easy-going and at times humorous and enjoyable. It was also noted as engaging, which made it easier for students to remember the subject matter. However, the majority view it as less fulfilling as they generally felt that very few lecturers were passionate in their teaching, skilful and knowledgeable enough to simplify and draw summaries from the voluminous number of presentation slides using practical examples.

The students complained that the approach to teaching in Australia is, from their perspective, too informal, relaxed, impromptu, disorganised and almost irresponsible. Unlike the teaching in China, it is perceived that the lecturers and/or tutors in Australia do not take an interest in meeting the needs of the students, or ensuring the students have understood the material presented in lecture/tutorial. In addition, the participants did not know how to involve themselves in classroom discussions, as they were only familiar with a one-way interaction that involved a directive communication manner between teacher and students. Examples of the teaching can be seen below as some first year students shared their experiences.
“The teachers in China would speak in front of the class while students are to listen quietly. Students are not allowed to move around when teaching is taking place… the views and opinions of students are not welcome, we just accept and listen without much contribution… no discussion at all, but in Australia… it is different, the teachers are not as strict, students are expected to talk… we have to say something… but I often don’t know what to say.” – (CY1)

“When I first came, I was not used to the teaching here. I queried why in China we could follow the teaching or instructions closely but here we are to study on our own with little instructions given by the teachers…” – (CY1)

Further, the cultural background of the participants has taught them to be passive and submissive to persons in positions of authority, such as academics (Samuelowicz, 1987a). The students find it difficult to raise queries, volunteer answers or clarify uncertainties in lectures, as such practices may be seen as bold and immodest. A study by Beaver and Tuck (1998) provided support for such concerns. They found that Asian and Pacific students demonstrated anxiety over questioning in the classroom and communication with teachers in a New Zealand tertiary institution. The students also find it difficult to concentrate and participate in lectures, due to the size of the lecture itself. Their attitudes towards knowledge and power may disadvantage them in the Australian educational system that rewards the assertive and highly verbal (Beaver and Tuck, 1998; Ginsberg, 1992). Further, most of the participants in this study perceive that the teaching in lectures/tutorials as not value-addling, due to the seemingly inferior teaching quality or delivery and inappropriate teaching attitudes. As evidenced in the findings, some learning and communication difficulties are greatly experienced by the students.
5.2.1.1 Teaching quality and delivery
Participants feel that although most of the lecturers/tutors are individuals with high qualifications, they were not schooled in the art of teaching. They claim that they were often unable to understand the teaching, as the lecturers/tutors failed to explain in a clear and understandable way. At times, the lectures were not properly structured, making it difficult for students to follow the lecture presentation, let alone comprehend the material. Some typical responses of first year students in experiencing the teaching are depicted as follows;

“I did not understand the teaching when first arrived and I actually went to speak to the lecturer and told her that I did not understand a word that she was teaching and asked if she could give me some solutions to the questions. She did not know what to do and said the coordinator in charge did not instruct her to put up the solution on the blackboard. Then I asked her what I could do as I am an international student and I do not understand her teaching at all. She just smiled and did not say anything. She is a new staff on training, a very young lady... she did not give me any guidance. The second lecture, I continued to attend but still I did not understand her and thereafter I attended some lectures and skipped some…” - (CY1)

“When I first came, I had difficulties adjusting where I had to do everything on my own and I felt extremely lost and hence I was left behind in my studies... furthermore, I could not really understand the teaching... later on the very last month before the exams... I skipped all the lectures and tutorials to study at home on my own and went for the exams... that’s how I passed my courses…” - (CY1)

The seemingly negative experience of the teaching by Chinese students continued on into their second and final year of studies, as they tried to comprehend and reason the differences in their experience of the teaching:
“The teachers here are very disorientated in their thoughts and teaching in that they skip from one issue to something entirely unrelated and back again to the issues discussed earlier. This is especially hard for us as English language is our second language and hence we might not be able to understand and follow well. I feel that they lack teaching strategies.” – (CY2)

“I find that a lot of the lecturers/tutors here are highly qualified but ironically they don’t seem to know how to teach. I don’t even understand what they teach but they themselves are highly qualified with doctorate degree or professor status. They don’t know how to relate or explain things in an understandable manner to students.” - (CY3)

“Maybe because the teaching was not organised, they kept jumping from one point to another then back again. The logic does not flow smoothly, such as in Accounting Theory I was made more confused after the class than when I was reading on my own. Therefore, as a result I had to be independent in my learning.” - (CY3)

In addition, some students were troubled that the lecturers/tutors were not concerned with the drop in attendance in lectures/tutorials as the semester progressed. The students felt strongly that such lecturers/tutors should at least reflect on their own teaching, which the students perceived to be the main cause of the reduction in attendance. At such, the students concluded that such lecturers/tutors were irresponsible in their teaching and such behaviour was regarded as most unacceptable and unfair to them. Some typical observations and experience by Chinese students can be seen below;
“The tutor would still teach regardless of the number of students, be it one or three. He would continue to do his own teaching in front and not be bothered with the response of students. He would not care why initially there were more students and now only left two… like wise in the lecture I had, it was well attended in the beginning but later there were only ten students attending the lecture. I ended up attending another lecture as well… I feel that the lecturer should reflect and examine his own teaching...” – (CY1)

“For the teachers here, even if there is only one student, his duty is to discuss tutorial questions with us, my duty as a student is to be present and listen to the discussion hence if I failed to turn up, it is my responsibility and loss…. it has nothing to do with him. It does not concern the teachers at all… at the end of the day, whether the student passes her exam is entirely the responsibility of the student, the teachers would not be concerned at all.” – (CY1)

“In the lectures, if the teaching is neither understandable nor clear enough for students, it would ultimately lead to absenteeism. I’ve seen a lot of that happening.” – (CY3)

Further, students were unaccustomed to the practice of tutors not taking class attendance, which is seemingly interpreted as tutors being disinterested in students. They felt that they have been somewhat ignored.

“Here, students’ existence is not important. Unlike in China, whether you wanted to learn or not, you still need to be physically present in class where attendance is marked…here, students’ presence is not of concern, our learning is not important to the teachers at all. The inability to have my presence felt is an adjustment for me, the teachers do not care.” – (CY2)
As the students progressed through their degree, they continued to have negative views on the teaching.

“To me, they did not have the intention to enable majority of the students in understanding what they were teaching, they merely go through the motion.” – (CY3)

“A lot of the teachers here would not be bothered if you understand the teaching or if things were clearly explained to you… as long as they have done their teaching they would just leave the class.” – (CY3)

Further, some students were dismayed with the way tutorials were conducted and felt de-motivated and discouraged to attend. In tutorials, they argued that some tutors were not knowledgeable, competent and/or responsible in their teaching. That was evidenced by tutors who merely reproduce the exact solutions from the solutions handout, without providing additional insights or explanation.

“I do not quite know the teaching style here, in tutorial… I find that the tutors were not engaging… they only read out or put on the screen the identical answers to the tutorial questions with what we already have… all solutions could be downloaded from the learning hub… what’s the point of attending tutorials if the tutors are unable to explain on the solutions or add value at all… it defeats the purpose and a waste of time to attend… therefore I did not attend the tutorials thereafter…” – (CY1)

“There is no compare between the teachers here with those in China, I feel that the teachers in China are more knowledgeable in the way they teach and approach the questions. The teachers here often do not prepare well for classes.” – (CY2)
The students reiterated that there were tutors who should not be teaching, due to their inability to teach. These tutors were identified as those who could not explain how and why certain solutions were derived, nor be seen as interested to do so.

“Some tutors are just not good in their teaching… for example in introductory accounting, the tutor was around fifty or sixty years old… who was unclear in her explanation and at times she herself would get confused or lost in her own teaching, not knowing what or where she was up to. She would pause for a few minutes then repeat the same thing… I feel very strange that university tutor teaches in such a manner... when I asked her why such solution, she would insist that that was the solution... without giving any explanation... that was very unsatisfying kind of learning.” – (CY1)

“The tutor I had, his teaching was appalling and during the first tutorial he actually asked if anyone in the class would like to attend another tutorial instead of his, he wasn’t interested in teaching at all.” – (CY2)

Nonetheless, despite the teaching of some tutors, preparation prior to attending tutorial is also a major contribution to their understanding, as a final year student shared with her views.

“If you’re prepared before attending the tutorial then you can understand the issues being discussed by the tutor a lot better. On the contrary, if you did not do your own preparation, you will not be able to understand at all. Overall, when comparing lectures to tutorials, I feel that I can learn more in tutorial than in lectures.” – (CY3)

Feeling disappointed and frustrated with the unsatisfactory teaching, some Chinese students pointed out that there were very few good or respectable quality teachers.
Good teachers were identified as those who deliver with passion, clear explanations and illustrations and who ensure that students understand the teaching by allowing time for questions. Poor teaching styles were seen as those who were irresponsible in their teaching; they would go through the motions in an uninterested manner. Such practice also included reading out word for word from the power point slides, providing little or no explanation to students and lack of clarity in their delivery (heavy accent and/or fast in pace, monotone).

“I don’t feel I’ve benefited from the teaching here… some lecturers would just read from the power point slides word for word and sentence for sentence… that way, I could read it by myself. Therefore, I feel that the teaching is rather odd and unacceptable… at times when I ask the lecturer ‘why did you get this answer? the reply came ‘the solutions indicated so’. The response by the lecturer made me feel stupid. Some lecturers might be knowledgeable but they are not good teachers as they do not know how to explain to students.”- (CY1)

Students’ view of the teaching did not seem to change for the better, even when they arrived at their final year of studies, as some final year students relate their experiences:

“I feel that lectures are not so useful to me. It is merely going through all the lecture slides without illustrations or examples… if that is all lecture is supposed to be, we could actually do that on our own and understand it without the lecturer… it is very dry and boring to sit in a lecture like that.”- (CY3)

“...I did not come across good teachers in my time here except for one subject, the rest of the teachers were not as good. They were not responsible; they merely teach what they had to and not interested themselves. I have not met really good teachers, I think very few
around here. Good ones are those who would ask if you have understood the teaching and if not they would go over the points again or ask if you have any questions and be responsible in making sure students do understand the concepts etc, teachers who would interact with students...some teachers merely read from the lecture slides providing no explanation at all...that is bad teaching.” – (CY3)

“Given that we are not bought up in this country… we are not familiar with the culture or situation here… so when the lecturer discuss something that seemed to be a common knowledge or an important local case, we do not understand. The rest of the local students appeared to be laughing and nodding in agreement on a particular discussion... we could not even understand a thing. I feel very sad and ashamed, not being able to even understand a joke by the lecturers. However, if the lecturer is able to use practical example to draw out the theory or discussion or able to help me to apply the knowledge then I’ll feel more motivated in my learning. I’ll feel what I’ve learned is of use… that seldom happen.” – (CY3)

It was also pointed out by students that some tutors would cease teaching once the solutions of the tutorial problems were put up on the board, ending the class prematurely. An example was given by a student as follows to illustrate one of the most common differences, where teachers in China often ran out of time in their teaching, while in Australia, students are often granted early dismissals.

“I feel that the teaching in China differs greatly from those in Australia in that here in Australia, when the time is up, the lecturer will definitely stop teaching. But in China, the teachers will attempt to continue teaching pushing students in their studies and tried to extend their allocated time. The teachers would compete among themselves to teach.” – (CY2)
Further, the refusal or reluctance of some tutors in staying behind after class to answer queries may result in students being less enthusiastic to approach their lecturers/tutors for help or clarification. Therefore, in general, students regard the teachers in China as more positive in their attitude than those in Australia. The former were more willing to spend time with students to ensure understanding, while the latter have little time to spare.

“In China, if you have any queries for the teachers after class, they would be most happy and willing to spend time explaining it to you. They like it when students ask questions, saying that you are very diligent. They would spend one hour with you on a ten minutes problem just to ensure you have fully understood. Unlike the lecturers/tutors here who give us the impression that time is money for them. As if we’ve only paid them for just one hour class hence they would only spend one hour with us in class. Anything beyond the one hour is not their responsibilities hence they would have nothing to do with us. If we were to ask them questions after class, that would be extra time for them outside their responsibility, hence they would be most reluctant to spare or waste that time with us... that’s how I feel.” – (CY2)

“I feel that the teachers here are not willing to spend time with you, if you approach them after class, they would not be happy to talk to you and hence turned their head and walked off. They just walk off without saying anything at all.” – (CY2)

5.2.1.2 Teaching Attitude
Some students felt strongly that many lecturers/tutors have attitude problems that adversely affect their teaching, making the delivery monotonous and mechanistic, rather than lively and interesting. The perceived negative attitude or disinterest in their
own teaching was manifested through their ineffective delivery of the materials. In addition, it was unanimously felt that the lecturers do not provide direct answers to students when approached. Instead, students were often redirected or expected to look for the answers themselves. Some lecturers were seen as not willing to entertain students who have queries and hence referred them to their tutors and vice versa.

“I find that some teachers do not answer your questions directly, they would ask you to look it up on your own or search out the answers by yourself… or the lecturers would refer you to the tutors and not wanting to assist you. At that point, I become really agitated… it is because I do not understand after looking up the materials that I approached the teachers, how could they in return ask me to look it up again when I’ve already done so and yet do not understand. It discourages me to learn.” – (CY2)

“Some tutors are like… ‘you do not need to email me if you have queries, you just go straight to the course coordinator concerned or the lecturers’… they do not want to take on the responsibility or solve any queries… basically, they do not want to give you too much of their time.” – (CY2)

The use of technology such as computers and overhead projectors are limited in China, and instead blackboards are heavily used. Students are required to take notes and they find note-taking beneficial and have accepted it as part of the learning process that permits them to digest the materials while writing them down during the teaching. Moreover in China, students are not normally given advance notice of the teaching outline or structure for the semester or term and hence they rely heavily on the teachers. In other words, they could not possibly preview or study on their own prior to the teacher furnishing them with notes. Therefore, to a certain extent, the students’ learning in China was dictated or directed by the teachers. In contrast, students in Australia could easily catch up if they missed a lecture/tutorial by going
through the readily available lecture notes and material at their own pace and time during the semester, but such was not possible to them previously in China.

5.2.2 Assessment
In Australia, it seems that Mainland Chinese students accept the different forms of assessments they are introduced to. In fact, forms of assessments in addition to exams and tests were new to the students in this study. Most students view assessments positively and in fact students across all year levels provided favourable views. Below are some examples of the perceptions of students in their first, second and final year, who happily welcome assessment other than exams. They acknowledge and appreciate the need to develop other skills via these assessments. Favourable perceptions of assessment by students in their first year are as below;

“…group assignments are new forms of assessment to us because in China we were not assessed in that manner. In China we were not asked to complete a piece of work with other students.”- (CY1)

“There are group assignments and we would divide our parts and contribute to the assignment, it is good as we could then discuss in groups. In China we did not have such group assignment as students are to study individually and be assessed individually too. Group assignment enables the sharing and exchange of knowledge and students could learn together too. Within the group we are able to present our individual ideas and opinion for discussion.” – (CY1)

“The assessment here is fine, the assignments that we have are more industry related and practical, much broader to help develop different skills in students too.” – (CY1)

Similar views shared by second year students resonate as follows;
“Via different forms of assessment... it creates different types of interest too... for example with assignment, we research and source out the information not only from the textbook but also from internet, library and other databases... that way, it actually helps us to understand it better and more in depth. Oral presentation would also enable us to practice our English speaking skills... hence it helps train us up in various skills.” – (CY2)

“When you work on your assignment, you could discuss with your peers and build up social or team working skills... I feel that I learn more this way... a broader coverage, it is also more relevant and connected to real life.” – (CY2)

“...the assessments here are by stages and it reflects on your learning or the amount of knowledge that you’ve acquired. Also, if you obtain high distinction grade in internal assessments, even if you just pass the final exam... your overall grade will still be at least a credit level... it eases the pressure off the final exam.” – (CY2)

The positive view of assessment is further supported by Final year students;

“I find internal assessments (other than purely focusing on exams) better, as it contributes towards our overall marks in the course... that way, we don’t feel so pressured.” – (CY3)

“Other assessment is good because if we only have exams just like in China, all the things that we are examined on will be of no value after the exams... we learn the things up purely for exams, can’t even remember them after exams... unlike other assessments such as group assignments, research essays or oral presentation where we could develop other skills and that is good for our future.” – (CY3)
“We get to learn a lot more things that are not in the textbook but still very essential for our future, such as, team work and interactions with other non Chinese students in group assignments… learning is not purely for exams.” – (CY3)

Although the students seemed to enjoy having internal assessments, they claimed that final exams continue to be their main focus. Some typical examples from students in their second and final year of studies are as follows;

“I feel that different forms of assessment is good but what is more important is still the final exam. At times even if you score very high marks during the semester but did not pass the exam, due to exam hurdle… you would still fail the course. Therefore, it all boils down to the final exam regardless of your performance in your internal assessments.” – (CY2)

“Just like last semester…. the exam was extremely difficult… the normal tutorial questions were not as hard and the questions discussed by lecturers and tutors were not too difficult too but the exam questions were very tough… one could go crazy with the exam… therefore, we need to focus and prepare well for exams.” – (CY2)

“I would still focus on the final exams, the rest of the assessments can be taken more lightly… at the end of the day, it is exams that would determine whether you pass or fail the course. Further, internal assessments are not normally marked too strictly when compared to final exams.” - (CY2)
“...even if you fail your assignment that is still fine, as long as you do well in the final exam...” – (CY2)

“I feel that the internal assessment is more appropriate to the local students than international Chinese students such as us... due to our past experience, we still tend to focus more on exam marks. Over here, exam only take on a proportion of 60% or 70% instead of 100% of the course, the rest of the marks can be gained through assignments, presentations etc and hence to students like us, it is not to our advantage due to our lack of skills in those areas... at times, I feel that I've done my very best in assignments and learned well too but with the marks given... I feel that I'm disadvantaged because I loose mark in writing and speaking.” – (CY3)

“To us coming from China, we're starting from ground zero whereas local students have already built themselves up for so many years in the areas of other assessments. Our foundation is different, we hold no advantage over the local students in terms of other assessments other than exams. Although university is fair to give everyone an opportunity to excel but we're starting from nothing and only starting to get to know the system and building it, while the local students are way ahead of us as they were trained in those assessments since young. I still prefer exams.” – (CY3)

Although assessment is generally well received by the participants, there are a few first year students, in particular, who displayed some reservations about assessment, in terms of ‘adequate’ guidance provided by lecturers/tutors in preparation for final exams. The students commented that the lecturers/tutors do not give sufficient guidance on matters such as how to learn or ways to approach or tackle exam questions. Students were not used to exercising their own judgment in deciding how
much to revise and where to focus for exams, since no exam hints or details are given to students.

“The assessment structure is not bad. However, the final exams are unlike those in China where the main or key areas would be highlighted by the teachers. Here, the teachers only teach the entire syllabus of the semester without letting us know the key areas to concentrate and hence, you need to figure that out yourself. Also unlike in China, where we had test after every chapter therefore, we would know where we needed to brush up rather than finding out only in the final exams.” – (CY1)

“I feel that in the final exam, the teachers should at least point out some key areas to students… what to be examined and what not to be examined. There are a lot to study, we had to make our own judgment or revise all the materials. In China, the teachers would advise student on the key areas that were going to be in the final exams. Occasionally, the teachers would give out hints or tips of the exams. But here there is no such practice. They would just finish the course material then have a brief revision week… then you’ll be on your own.” – (CY1)

However, second and final year students no longer wait or expect the lecturers/tutors to direct or give out hints or key areas of exams; instead they appear to be more independent in preparing for exams and attempting internal assessments.

“…the assignments due dates are normally prior to the final exams and hence, we get to review our work when we do the assignments and at the same time familiarise ourselves with the topics and better understand the materials for the exams…” – (CY2)
“The internal assessments actually help us draw out key areas of the topics we studied and hence better prepare for exams.” – (CY2)

“Internal assessments forces us to learn and prepare for the final exams… that way, we will not procrastinate revision until right before the final exams… that is good.” – (CY3)

“I find internal assessments a great help in learning, it pushes me to focus on important issues.” – (CY3)

5.2.3 Teacher/Student relationship
In Australia, lecturers/tutors are generally perceived to be friendly and to some extent helpful. However, when the students were probed further, they agreed that the perceived friendliness of lecturers/tutors seemed superficial, as they did not know the teaching staff well enough to comment on such a relationship, if indeed a relationship existed. If such a relationship did exist, it was strongly felt by most students that the relationship was one of mere acquaintance and somewhat distant. Students did not see that such relationships would flourish into those relationships they had with their teachers in China. Such views are unanimously shared by Chinese students of all year levels.

“I feel that generally they are pretty friendly, even if I’m late to lectures/tutorials, they would still remain friendly and say hello or hi to me, unlike in China, where students would be punished for being late.”
- & C Y 1

“They are generally friendly, but here even if they dislike you they will still smile to you.” - & C Y 1
“I feel that whether they are willing to help you or not, they would still be polite. Even if they refused to answer your questions, they do it politely.” – (CY3)

“Most of them seemed friendly but there will not be any casual conversation between students and lecturers, well… at least not with us, Chinese international students.” – (CY3)

Given the limited contact students have with their lecturers/tutors, most were not able nor in the position to provide further comments. Such findings are contrary to the common practice of Chinese who are known for their strength in developing contacts, relationships or “guanzi”. Further, given that their previous educational background promotes heavy reliance on teachers, it is only to be expected that there would be at least some form of relationship with their lecturers/tutors. Interestingly, that was not the case and some students even pointed out that they do not even know the names of their lecturers/tutors.

“The teachers in China are very close to the students, but that is not the case in Australia. Maybe even if I bumped into my lecturers here on the street I can’t even recognise them.” – CY1

“If you were to ask me the names of my secondary school teachers, I could easily tell you but if you were to ask me the names of my current lecturers or tutors, I do not have a clue.” – CY1

“They are not interested to get to know us, unlike the teachers in China. I don’t know them too.” – (CY2)

“I have no relationship with the lecturers… it is like… I recognise the lecturer but he does not recognise me.” – (CY2)
According to the students, there are some likely reasons why they do not have much contact with the lecturers/tutors, despite their strong culture in building student-teacher relationships. Some of the possible reasons include limited contact with the teaching staff, lecture size, English language and cultural barriers.

5.2.3.1 Limited contact – time
According to the students, the teaching staff were only available to them during appointed consultation times, unlike in China where students are able to meet with their teachers anytime they desire without the necessity to make an appointment. Students found it most inconvenient and too formal in making an appointment, as it is not part of their culture to do so.

“I find the teachers here extremely busy, difficult to locate them. You have to make booking, then email or check a time that both parties are available then only after a few days that you’re able to meet up. Therefore, at times that all seemed too troublesome… so forget it.” – (CY1)

“We don’t know them, they would just leave right after class, there is no relationship with the teachers... I wish that the teachers could have more time for us, to listen to us and care for us...well at least to know us.” – (CY3)

“I find the teachers here more humorous and practical in nature, I am quite willing to listen in lecture, but on an individual level, I don’t feel that I have any contact with the lecturers, coz they would leave right after the lectures or tutorials. At times, it is difficult to find them and therefore, getting help from them on an individual level is close to nil.” – (CY3)
Further, by comparison, the class time in Australia is much shorter than in China; students would only meet their lecturer/tutor once or twice a week for not more than three hours. Moreover, most lecturers/tutors would rush off to the next class, leaving no opportunity for students to approach them for help when needed. Students from Mainland China find this uneasy to accept, as they have had the experience in China of seeking help from their teacher by asking questions at the end of the class, when they could more easily approach the teacher personally, rather than during the class in front of other students. The inability to meet the lecturers/tutors, coupled with the perceived unwillingness of lecturers/tutors to spend time with the student, inadvertently hindered development of a lecturer/student relationship. Therefore, it is not surprising that most students do not know the names of their lecturers/tutors.

“It is very very normal indeed not knowing the teachers’ names, lots of students do not know their teachers’ names.” – (CY1)

“I have no relationship with the teachers here; there is no contact with the teachers as we only meet with them maybe once a week for a few hours in a large lecture hall or tutorial. That limited contact are under normal teaching hour, unlike in China where we could have casual chatting with the teachers outside teaching hours or class time on top of the normal teaching time… there is nothing that we have in common with the teachers here outside the subject… we hardly know them in person. The only purpose of knowing their names is because we needed to fill their names on our exams or assignment cover sheets… other than their names we know nothing about them.” – (CY2)

“Overall, there is limit to the contacts we have with the lecturers, it is very difficult for them to know us individually in a semester. Especially now that we need to prepare our resume and put down the names of some referees, I find it very difficult to find a teacher we know me. I have very little opportunity to converse with them, not to mention
knowing me personally... besides, we only meet them once a week...”
– (CY3)

Below is one of the many negative experiences that students have with their lecturers/tutors, which left them confused and ultimately developed the opinion that the teaching staff were not as friendly or helpful as they seemed. As a student explained, her encounter with a tutor who seemed unwilling to assist her after class put her off approaching that tutor thereafter..

“I remembered I had a tutorial and I raised a question with the tutor after class, the tutor clearly said that the tutorial is finished and if I have any questions, to send him emails. In the tutorial there were many students asking questions and when it came to my turn, the time was up for that tutorial and the tutor was not willing to help. I feel that even though the tutorial time is up, he could still explain to me while he packs up his things... there is nothing wrong with that, he had the time but he was not willing. From then onwards, I was reluctant to ask him any more questions since he was not willing to answer me... although outside classes, they might seemed to be friendly, smile to you or greet you when they meet you in the lift but all those gestures are very superficial...”– (CY1)

5.2.3.2 Size of lecture
When Chinese students first attended lectures, they were intimidated by the sheer size of the lecture, which often consisted of hundreds of students. It was daunting and considered difficult to raise queries or make contact with their lecturers during the lecture. Even when some lecturers encouraged questions from students and actively invited students to contribute or interrupt their delivery, the Chinese students would not have the courage to do so. The fear of asking a seemingly unintelligent question and not wanting to be humiliated or lose face in front of their peers strongly discouraged students to raise queries in lectures. The difficulties in catching the
lecturers after class made it equally impossible to clarify when in doubt, let alone establishing a relationship with their lecturers/tutors.

“Here, we don’t know the teachers personally, no connection with them. They come during class time and leave right after class, there is no interaction with them at all. In the big lecture hall with so many students, we hardly know them… not possible at all.” – (CY2)

“I feel that our contact with the teachers is too limited… in a big lecture hall, how is it possible to know them? we can’t even clarify or ask questions… well too many people in the lecture, how to ask questions?… it will be good if there could be some form of after class activities where the lecturers and students would mingle… if we know them better… maybe it would be easier to ask questions too.” – (CY3)

5.2.3.3 Barrier to communication
Chinese students perceived that one of the major reasons for not being able to develop a relationship with the lecturers/tutors is due to their lack of English-speaking skills. Most Chinese students are not confident enough to initiate conversations with their lecturers/tutors, as they feared being misunderstood. Some have difficulties expressing themselves clearly and hence, chose to withdraw from participating, initiating or reaching out all together, not wanting to be laughed at or make a fool of themselves (face issues) in front of their peers. (English language is one of the variables of interest which is discussed in the later part of this chapter).

“If there is no barrier in language where I could speak fluently just like the local students, I’m confident I could be like the local students who make friends with the teachers. I would initiate more.”–• €Y1• •
“Even if we wanted to say a lot, we have difficulties expressing ourselves unlike the local students who are able to communicate better with the lecturers/tutors.” – (CY2)

“Here, you just need to take care of yourself, no one is going to be concerned about your study for you… maybe because we are international students, maybe the local Australian students would have a better relationship with the teachers via email etc… but at least that (relationship with teachers) does not happen with us. As international students maybe our English language is not as good and hence, we are not connected to the teachers.” – (CY2)

5.2.3.4 Cultural differences

Undoubtedly, there are some cultural differences that might deter the development of a teacher-student relationship. Chinese students generally do not initiate conversation, especially when the other party is seen to be higher in the social hierarchy. According to the students, teachers are normally regarded as the initiator in a dialogue and/or relationship, while students are the respondents. However, that is often not the case in Australian universities as some students encountered. Coming with the expectation and anticipation that the Australian teaching staff would initiate contact just like the teachers in China, it was most disappointing to the students when the ‘initiator’ failed to initiate. Such inactions could in turn be misread as being disinterest on the part of the lecturers/tutors. Such perceptions are seen by students across all year levels as indicated below.

“...students here need to initiate and only that way the teachers would be aware of your existence. In China, it is the direct opposite where the teachers would initiate to talk to you...” – (CY1)
“I find that the teachers here would respond to you if you ask them questions, if you have no questions or queries they would never talk to you...” – (CY1)

“No contact with them, the most is via email and at times the lecturers/tutors would not even want to reply your email.” – (CY2)

“There is no casual chat with the teachers. They would refuse you in a very nice manner also.” – (CY3)

In many instances, Chinese students felt excluded in conversations or discussions, especially when the lecturers/tutors are seen as insensitive to include them or offer any explanation of the local culture or humour being discussed. As such, students are disappointed for feeling excluded. They would gradually distance themselves in such chats or discussions.

“Their kind of humours are vastly different from ours. At times the lecturers/tutors would joke around and laugh, but we would not have a clue what the joke is about. The local students like to laugh a lot but we just don’t understand it a single bit.”– • CY1 •

“At present, I do not understand a lot of things that are said by the lecturer like the other day a lecturer asked if I watch the footy match, I said I did not. The tutor responded that I was odd and queried if I actually live in Melbourne since Melbourne is a place of sports. Well I do not even have a TV in my place as I’m renting, further I do not like football... what is wrong with that?”– • CY1 •

In addition, the way issues or concerns were handled by lecturers/tutors would at times be viewed as unacceptable or inappropriate by the students. Such perceptions would indeed act as an obstacle in a good teacher-student relationship. This often
occurs when the lecturers/tutors are approached for queries or clarification and the responses expected by the students are far from being met. Instead of eagerly explaining and clearing the queries of students, the lecturers/tutors are seen as disinterested, ignoring and even attacking the students with humiliating comments and crushing their ego, confidence and self esteem. Below is one of the many experiences students had during their time in Australian universities, as a student relates one of her many unpleasant experiences with a tutor.

“…in Management Accounting, I had a question and hence I approached the tutor to clarify. He answered sarcastically and I was anxious as he did not answer me then he asked the whole class if any students found it difficult with the question. He then asked me if I know the meaning of KISS, I answered that in the past I was told by a teacher that KISS means Keep It Simple. He then humiliated me by saying ‘No, that is not correct, it means Keep It Simple Stupid!’ At that time I was really angry and upset as to why the tutor could say such a nasty thing. Thereafter, I basically self studied that subject. I hated him and hence, never ever approached him again since that tutorial.”

The above illustration of the tutor’s response can have a significant and direct impact on the way students learn. In general, Chinese students by their very nature and cultural background would not normally participate in class, let alone seek clarification. Therefore, in the above situation, students’ courage and attempts to go outside their comfort zone were somewhat mishandled due to the apparent cultural ignorance of the tutor and consequently jeopardising a possible relationship. The insensitive response of lecturers/tutors can complicate matters and/or destroy students’ confidence and hence affect their learning.
Further, coming from a homogenous society with a singular dominant culture inevitably presents another layer of challenge for the Chinese students in embracing a different culture and extending friendship beyond their own culture.

“I find that the teachers would smile to you or seemed to be friendly but it is merely on the surface. The thinking pattern are different, could not gel in with them.” – (CY1)

“...the lecturers/tutors are of different race and culture and hence we can’t get too close anyway.” – (CY3)

The perception that different cultural backgrounds are an obstacle to relationship building could be one of the reasons why students do not approach their ‘foreign’ lecturers/tutors for help. Instead they resort to solving any questions among themselves. Consistent with the findings, Chinese students are found to be most willing and comfortable in approaching their lecturers/tutors who are of Chinese descent for help. Nonetheless, they are disappointed that there are only very few such lecturers/tutors around.

Therefore, it is not surprising that although students appeared to have close ties with their teachers in China, very few actually remember the names of their current lecturers/tutors. That alone indicates their loose ties (if any at all) with the lecturers/tutors in Australian universities. Some students argued that their former teachers in China would remember them fondly and be most happy to meet them even after many years since last being taught them. In contrast, their current lecturers/tutors in Australia hardly recognise them when they bumped into them in the campus lift or on the street. As some students disappointingly explained their experiences:

“Our former teachers would be overjoyed to see us and remember us as students from certain year or batch. Unlike the lecturers/tutors here,
even if you walk side by side with them, they would not even know that you are in their classes.” – (CY 2)

“When I was applying for jobs and needed names of referees in my resume, I was thinking hard... who are the teachers who know me personally?... and hence I approached a tutor... I attended all his classes and participated in his tutorials... his first response was ‘who are you?’... there is no opportunity to get to know the teachers at all…”
– (CY 3)

The findings discussed above echo the view of Biggs (1996) that Chinese educational systems display the characteristic of collectivist culture, where communications, discussions and study groups are part of teacher-student relationships that goes beyond the classroom. Therefore, in the absence of such an extended ‘beyond the classroom’ environment and opportunity, students felt that they had no way of developing communication or relationships with their Australian lecturers/tutors.

5.2.4 Workload
In contrast, despite the freedom of choice in Australia, it was found that some students went to the other extreme of being unmotivated in their studies. This arose as there was no one to monitor or keep an eye on them and they often lacked self discipline or determination to carry out tasks on their own. Most students view the workload in Australia as being very light, flexible and somewhat inconsistent, to the extent that they felt uneasy, empty and unmotivated. It was seen as relaxing during the semester but when final exams drew near, they became most busy, disoriented, anxious and stressed. They often thought that they have an abundant amount of free time during the semester, but time was often wasted as they lacked the ability, skills and knowledge to manage their studies and daily life appropriately. Being unable and unfamiliar to utilise the freedom they now have in organising their time has ultimately led to some students adopting a slack approach to their studies during the semester. Some students would begin learning by studying well into the night or all through the
night, as they attempt to cram everything in the week(s) before the exams. Below are typical samples of how first and second year students view the workload of their studies.

“Here I feel very bored, what else can I do, I can’t do much... the workload is too light indeed... feeling like I’m wasting my precious time here, just like a holiday here.” - (CY1)

“After the experience I have in China, I do not feel that there is any workload here.” - (CY1)

“To be honest, I did not study when I first came. Only two weeks prior to the exams that I started to prepare and revise my work. Surprisingly I passed my exams. Here, as long as I can pass that’s ok. When I look back trying to remember what I’ve learned, I don’t really know.” - (CY1)

“I felt very empty and lonely when I first arrived, nothing much to do, not motivated... too relax, don’t know where to start, then exam came, I had to pass the exams and hence I started to work hard and revise my work... that’s how I managed.” – (CY1)

“If you compare the amount of work with those in China, I feel that it is a lot lighter here. You will have time to do things that you like, but you have to be careful not to be lazy... it is very easy not to do the work coz no one will remind you or push you in your studies. We need to be aware that we’re here to study, hence need to spend time in self study and be discipline.” – (CY2)
“During normal times, we are fine but when exams begin to draw near, we became anxious and started to study more... at times burning the midnight oil.” – (CY2)

Some of them recognise the need to spend time on their studies despite the seemingly light workload, as they view their English level as one of the major drawbacks to their learning in Australia.

“I think the workload itself is reasonable for the local students, but for Chinese students like us... it is too relaxing... well except... I mean the structure of the courses is good, it is only due to our level of English that we needed more time to understand.”- (CY1)

“The tasks or load given to us is not heavy but we still spent a lot of time in our studies due to English language. I need to check the dictionary for words every now and then while the local students would easily understand what is said.” – (CY1)

“The load is not too demanding but I spend my time doing self study. In the past, I would not spend that much time on my own to study. Previewing, revising, taking notes, summarising own notes, in China I would not need to do that.” – (CY2)

That is particularly the case when they first arrived in Australia and were unfamiliar with the tertiary system that emphasised independent learning, in which the student has primary responsibility for their own learning. The Chinese students were never formally taught to be independent, as some students explained;

“I think one of the reasons is because back in China we were not trained by our teachers the self study skills. Therefore, when we arrived here we brought with us our old habits in that if we were asked
by our teachers to do certain readings or exercises, we’ll do it, if not we would not out of our own initiative. Hence we feel we have extreme amount of spare time as no one here is going to tell us what to do.” – (CY1)

“In China, you would have learned and studied everything that you needed during class time, the teachers would explain in great details what you needed to know and hence all learning is done in class, unlike here where students need to depend on themselves to revise after classes and learn things up .” – (CY2)

Others find the workload more reasonable and manageable compared to that in China. It is seen as suitable for the subject matter and leaving students with some free time to pursue their interests and hobbies and have a more balanced student life.

“I find the load here appropriate, not too light that you can’t learn much and at the same time not too heavy that you’re tied down by it and feeling unhappy because it is choking you. The amount of workload given is just nice for students to acquire the knowledge needed.” – (CY1)

When students have had more time in Australia, they soon view the workload to be not as light as what they previously perceived when they first arrived. Below are some examples of the views of final year students.

“No doubt the workload in China is a lot more than what we have in Australia… the majority of the study and homework in china are done in school under the direction and supervision of the teachers, unlike here where approximately 80% of the workload is self study, outside class time. For example, for every course of three contact hours, you will have to put in at least six to seven hours of your own… courses such as auditing requires even more self study time…” – (CY3)
“Even though we have to study more courses in China compared to here in Australia… the amount of self study time here is not at all shorten. Especially when it is not in our first language, we needed to spend a lot of time to read through and understand the materials. Further, the teachers here do not pressure students to study hence you have to be self disciplined and independent to learn and that takes time.” – (CY3)

“When I first arrived, I thought that studying here is very relaxing, just like those portrayed in the advertisement shown in China… students lying on green pasture smiling or laughing along with their friends… lots of freedom and not much reading is needed… but that is not true. I have to work hard too, lots of reading maybe even more than the locals due to our English skills… I spent a lot more time in my studies than anticipated although there are less homework.” – (CY3)

5.2.5 English language

English language is one of the most critical issues impacting on the context of learning for Chinese students, as they learn with a foreign language in an alien land. Generally, students would encounter adjustment problems when they attempt to adapt to the teaching and learning in the host country, such as different educational expectations and the use of English for instruction (Gan, 2009; Andrade, 2006). They often find listening skills a problem, especially when they first arrive in Australia. This is attributed to their own lack of English proficiency, the Australian accent and other unfamiliar English accents. The Mainland Chinese students in all year levels have expressed their concern and difficulty in this area. As recognised by O’Keefe (2006) and Kaputin (1993), accented English can add a layer of difficulty to communication.

“There are a lot that I do not understand via listening… maybe the main reason is because of the English language especially when we
first arrived. Everything is in English, such as in Business law. The entire lecture was about the history of Australian law and all the locals were able to understand and enjoy the discussion with the lecturer… but I did not even understand a word that was spoken.” – (CY1)

“Actually being a Mainland Chinese student studying here, it is impossible to be 100% effective in understanding the lessons via listening. As for myself, I could only pick up on the few pages of lecture notes that the lecturer teaches and the likely topic or issues that are touched on… but with the words that the lecturer uttered or phrases that were introduce, I would need to spend some time after class to go through it with my computer or dictionary in order to translate and hence understand them.” – (CY2)

“To me, I receive the lecture or information in English but ultimately I would understand them in Mandarin, which is my first language. I’m not able to receive in English, process in English and output it in English… not yet anyway. Therefore, it takes time for me to digest what I listen in lecture… I need to spend time alone to figure things out.” – (CY2)

“I feel that when I first came, there is a need for the teachers to slow down in their speech… after so many semesters, I’ve now accustomed to it, initially I had difficulties making sense of what they were trying to say.”~ (CY3)

“The most important is listening skills, if you can not understand what is being taught you could only go home and do your own reading to understand it. Or you would try to catch certain words that the teachers said so that you can match where the teacher was up to in the lecture notes… then that way you could go home and understand it.” – (CY3)
The students recognise the gaps between the level of English expected of them and their level of proficiency. In particular, they think they fall below the expected level in spoken, written and listening skills. Their deficiency in English language contributes significantly to the increased amount of time needed in their studies (as discussed in the workload section above). The students argued that although the workload itself was much lighter and easier than in China, the time spent on studying was way beyond that anticipated. Students commented that if not for their difficulties with the English language, the teaching could also be more easily understood, digested and accepted. Students find themselves spending more time to understand the materials, patiently and persistently looking up the dictionary.

“I’m sure the workload would be even lighter if lectures are conducted in Mandarin rather than in English, I could then understand better and hence need not spend too much time in revision.” – (CY1)

“If I could understand English better, I would feel more relax in my studies. If the teachings were conducted in Mandarin, I would understand the materials quicker than the local students in lecture, but unfortunately all are in English. It is very difficult to lift one’s English level.” – (CY1)

“I feel that if my listening skill is better, I will be able to understand more in lectures and tutorials compared to doing the reading at home… although ultimately you need to read through the materials to remember them.” – (CY2)

“…although the study load here is lighter but we have a lot of other things to do which take up our time. For example, to revise our work, we need to spend hours to understand it and check out the meanings. Maybe the main issue is with the English language where we needed time to understand new words etc… everyone is saying that if the
courses are taught in our Chinese language we might only need to read through just prior to the exams...” – (CY3)

“I feel that because of my English level I spent more time in my studies... I used three hours to read a chapter while the local students seated beside me told me that she only used one hour per chapter.” – (CY3)

“I find that at times reading is rather difficult, very time consuming as I have to read it through over and over again until I can remember and understand...” – (CY3)

Further, it was also claimed that through the fear of being laughed at due to their imperfect or broken English, the students failed to establish dialogue or a relationship with their lecturer/tutor (as discussed earlier). Although the participants speak English, they may have difficulties with their spoken English being understood. Robertson et al.’s (2000) study indicated that students’ weaknesses in the English language, sensitivity to their ability, anxiety and lack of confidence, have prevented them from participation in class. Such a result is also found in other studies by Gan (2009), Senyshyn et al., (2000), Lewthwaite (1996) and Tompson and Tompson (1996). In addition, the assessment appeared to be more challenging than it actually is, due to students' inefficiency in the language.

“I seldom ask the lecturers or tutors for help because the manner that we express ourselves might not be understood by them... also even if they answer us... due to our poor listening skills... we might not be able to fully understand what is being said... further, I might take away too much of their time. Our inability to speak clearly would annoy them especially outside teaching hour... they would be very reluctant to talk to us any further after class.” – (CY2)
“I've tried asking the lecturer when I did not understand, but I still could not comprehend what the lecturer was trying to say and the lecturer could not understand me as well. Therefore, seeking help from friends is a better way to understand the materials or issues. If another student have understood and explain it to you, it would be a lot clearer, especially friends from Malaysia or Singapore who could speak both English and Mandarin.” – (CY2)

In addition, as part of the core subjects in an accounting degree, law subjects pose the greatest challenge to most students. Students view these subjects as technically more demanding due to the required command of English grammar. It is also found in the study by Yang and Silver (2010) that students tend to struggle far more in theoretical and law studies. Below are samples of some of the views of the students in this study.

“There reason why I did well in accounting subjects is because there are lots of calculations, not language. Even with the language used, it is merely simple English and easy to understand, unlike in law subjects… there are lots of words and that makes it more difficult.” – (CY1)

“I think it has to do with English language. When I study law subjects, my English proficiency is not up to that level to understand it. I could not understand the lectures but I really wished that I do understand so that I would not waste time to go through it. Personally, I am the type of student who could remember better if I could understand via listening rather than reading. Therefore if I’m strong in my English, I would be able to remember the lesson taught in the two hour lecture, but now that I do not understand the lecture fully, I could only resort to reading it on my own.”– (CY1)
“Accounting subjects are not too bad but with law subjects, they are challenging for me. There are more new words and terms that I need to look up in the dictionary. Every time when I read, I would look up the meaning and I do that on a regular basis, repeatedly I look up the words until I finally get the meaning. In the exam when there are unfamiliar words or phrases, I would feel like that’s the end of my world, to prevent that from happening, I would try to remember some key terms or words for the exams.” – (CY2)

“For subject like law, it would require a higher level of English skill to understand and the most important are listening and reading ability while writing skill is mainly for assignment and exams only.” – (CY2)

There are also some students who argue that if not for the language, they would be as quick, if not quicker in grasping, learning and understanding as the local students. They see themselves being disadvantaged and hence most would be content in just achieving a pass grade, unlike in China where the majority of the students would seek to achieve the highest possible grades. Further, the Chinese students find part of the challenge for them in understanding in lectures and tutorials is attributed to the Australian accent and other unfamiliar English accents used by the teaching staff.

5.2.5.1 Australian accent

Listening and understanding a two hour lecture delivered in English is demanding for students when they first arrive in Australia. This is due largely to the limited or non-existent exposure to English teaching. Therefore, it becomes even more challenging to them when the lectures are delivered by native Australians with a strong accent and at a fast pace. Most students had never attended classes taught by a native English speaker and hence significant adjustments are needed for them to tune in to the way English is spoken. In their very first semester, they find it almost impossible to hear the words used, let alone understand the lectures. It becomes most trying, frustrating and confusing for them to listen to such a delivery, especially when the
lecturers are regarded by others as experts in the subject matter. As such, it is not uncommon that students would regard the teaching as ineffective or not-value adding, as it is perceived as unclear and not understandable to them.

“Although the business law lecturer is the author of the textbook, he did not know how to teach. Maybe because he had an extremely strong Australian accent and our listening skills are not as good. I couldn’t understand what he was talking about. That was the very first semester when I arrived here in Australia. Hence I resorted to reading the textbook by myself. I can understand more by reading than listening. When I read, I can read slowly and if I do not understand I can always look it up but when listening in lecture, it goes by too quickly. Don’t understand what was said means don’t understand and it could not be repeated a second time for you to make sense of it.” – CY1

“My tutor was very fast in his speaking and that made it even harder for us to catch on top of the strong accent.” – (CY2)

“In my first year here, I had difficulties listening and understanding the lecturers’ English. They spoke with accents and too quickly… but as we listen more then it gets easier.” – (CY3)

“When I first came, it was rather difficult too… after two to three months, it was better. Also, in the very first semester, the materials were simpler too and if you are willing to spend time in revising your work… it is still manageable.” – (CY3)

Students complained that some lecturers just mumbled in their delivery, without making much eye contact with students. That made it most frustrating and hard for them to understand the lecture. In addition, recorded or podcast lectures are seen as
ineffective or unhelpful, as the students could not comprehend the strong Australian accent. It certainly took a while before students begin to tune in or become accustomed to it.

“Given that I could not even understand the lecture when I was face to face with the lecturer, it would be worse if I were to just listen to recorded lectures. It definitely would be even more difficult for me to understand.” – (CY1)

Students are, however, thankful that there were a few lecturers/tutors who were more considerate in their teaching, delivering in a moderate pace and who consciously made an effort to speak in a clearer tone. These teachers could be more easily accepted and understood, despite the strong Australian accent.

“Some lecturers with strong Australian accent are kind enough to speak clearly and I could understand those.” -· CY1• •

5.2.5.2 Other unfamiliar accents
The English spoken by non native Australians is found to be equally challenging to the Chinese students. In particular, they find listening to Indian/Sri Lankan lecturers/tutors most tiring and demanding. These lecturers were perceived to have a very strong Indian accent that could not be easily understood. Further, the pace is usually forceful, fast and without much pause. Most students struggled to make sense of the teaching due to the strong and foreign accent, given that their English is not proficient to start with.

“The Statistics lecturer is an Indian whose pronunciation is considered close to English but there were words that are very hard to understand. He kept saying ‘deeata,’ I couldn’t make up what he was saying hence with all boldness I asked him what he meant, he then wrote on the board ‘data’… I felt stupid and that I should not have asked such
embarrassing question... but I could not understand and it was most confusing and disturbing for me.” – (CY1)

“It was absolutely tiring, certain words are not clearly audible, say for example the word ‘to’ sounded like ‘do’ instead. Therefore, we had to concentrate fully and be extremely attentive...” – (CY1)

Overall, English language is unanimously viewed by the Mainland Chinese students as the key issue in their learning at university in Australia, especially for students who are in their initial years of their studies. Also, this issue affects their perceptions and hence experience of the rest of their learning context.

In summary, this chapter has considered the educational background and perceptions of Mainland Chinese students as they experience the learning context in Australian universities. In the following chapter, the impact of the educational context on the students’ learning is explored.
Chapter 6

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS – The Influence of the Perceived Context

Flowing from the previous chapter on the learning context as experienced and perceived by the Mainland Chinese students in Australia, this chapter focuses on the students’ response as a result of their perceptions. It commences with a general overview, followed by a more specific discussion of each area of the learning context.

6.1 THE INFLUENCE OF THE PERCEIVED CONTEXT OF LEARNING

Despite the negative experiences and complaints Mainland Chinese students have had with the context of learning they found in Australia (as discussed in previous chapter), most of the students have subsequently responded and adjusted to the academic environment here. The experience from their studies in Australia has led the Chinese students in adjusting their learning and seeing the need and benefits of adopting self-directed learning (see Figure 7.3 Students’ learning and response). Below are examples of how first year Chinese students responded to their perceptions of the learning context in Australia and how by the second semester, had begun to adapt their learning strategies accordingly.

“In China, I followed all the instructions of my teachers… here in Australia, I have to rely on myself… that’s the only way to go.” – (CY1)

“A big improvement, self study itself is an improvement here. Not relying on others in your learning. It lifts your ability to resolve problems in the workplace in the future rather than not knowing what to do… in China we merely follow instructions, no self study… but here we need to be responsible, I find that I’ve improved.” – (CY1)
“Here, we could learn lots of things which we could not back in China. For example, the coverage is broad looking at global issues, it also encourages us to self learn and be disciplined. Unlike in China where we only follow the lead of the teachers, here it forces us to read and understand things on our own. There is no one to keep an eye on what we do in our learning hence we need to have the self awareness to push ourselves in our learning. If we do not take interest, we would fall into the pit hence we need to be very conscientious. We have to put pressure on ourselves continuously. Although on the surface, we might look relax but there is quite a pressure within us to keep learning.” – (CY1)

The students observed in this research have gradually changed their study habits in response to the initial negative experiences they have of the learning context. They begin to modify their learning during their first year of studies, in order to cope with the Australian educational environment. They find themselves more capable of studying and doing things independently, increasingly becoming more intrinsically motivated and taking the initiative to source out materials and read additional resources on their own. Below are further examples of the response of first year Chinese students.

“To be honest, I didn’t study during my first semester here, didn’t know how… I was lost… I used to just following instructions which I no longer able to since no instructions are given... but I needed to pass the exams hence 2 weeks prior to the exams, I started to revise my work and prepare… I studied on my own and I passed.” – (CY1)

“Here, I find that I have gradually developed very strong self study ability or skills. I feel that this newly acquired skills are more useful and better off compared with being forced by teachers to study. Here, I am able to cater for my own needs. In the past, we relied heavily on our
the teachers in most things. The teachers in China would always lead us, holding our hands in everything but here we have to face everything independently. It trains me in my time management skills, how to appropriately organise my time, life and study. Not just relying on the teachers to push us or to force us to study.” – CY1

Students in their first year of studies also saw the importance of acquiring an understanding during the lessons by listening attentively and with practice by answering the questions after class. The students claimed that they never had to preview notes or materials prior to attending classes when they were in China and they hardly had time to do so. In China, time was mostly spent in revising the lesson rather than preparing for it. However, preparing prior to attending classes is seen as essential to them when they attend classes in Australia and revising after the lecture is said to be equally important to understand any areas that they did not manage to understand in lecture. That way, they gain a deeper understanding of what was taught in the lecture and remember and understand the issues better.

“I find that studying here would help develop my own self study ability. Listening to lecture is like when you have read through the readings but still unsure of certain areas hence attend lecture to obtain clarification of the points or areas. In tutorial, via tutorial questions and discussion, one would acquire a deeper understanding of the materials. The teaching here is entirely different from those in China, we as students need to adjust our ways as well.” – (CY1)

“Personally I also realise that reading on your own is very important. It could be streamlined to both previewing and reviewing the materials. Prior to attending lectures, I would preview all the lecture notes and after lectures, there will definitely be some areas which I failed to understand hence I would review them again. That way, I could understand better and have a deeper impression of the lecture… but in
China, we never do that. I've learned to be more independent here, well... I have to.” – (CY1)

Further, despite some less positive experiences the students have had during their time in Australia, they persevered on, as some first year students shared their views.

“Although I don’t like the experience, I paid my tuition fees, so if I do not turn up in class, it is my losses. If you add up the total contact hours and the fees we paid, say for example it averages out to a cost of AUD 50.00 per hour, meaning in Chinese Yuan it would be at least 300.00 per hour. Who wouldn’t turn up in class if they calculate that way? I would not be deterred by the bad teaching and experience here, as long as I turn up, I’m sure I would learn something, somehow...” – (CY1)

“Our main duty is to pass the exams, every semester our family pay a few thousand dollars in our school fees, compared to the local students who only pay a little... my only thought is to pass all my exams... irregardless of what I face.”- (CY1)

“At present, my aim is to obtain this degree because I paid such high tuition fees, for Chinese families, it is common that ‘face’ is important... to my family back in China, they would proudly share with their friends and neighbours that their son is studying abroad...that would generally be highly regarded...” – (CY1)

As observed, the Mainland Chinese students seemed to be resilient, flexible and determined in their learning. Despite the many obstacles the students claimed to have encountered, they would endeavour to compromise or make the necessary changes to fit into the new environment. As soon as they noticed the differences in the Australian learning context compared to that of their previous experience in China,
they found themselves needing to make adjustments and adapt, or risk not getting through their studies. The motivational factors are none other than meeting the expectations of family and not to lose face. A Chinese family’s hope and dreams commonly rest on the shoulders of the child(ren) and when the expectations are not met, it will bring shame to the family through a ‘lose of face’. A family’s name, status and reputation are highly regarded in the Chinese culture and it is almost unforgiving when a family’s name is not properly upheld by the next generation (as discussed in Chapter 3).

Further, in China most decisions are made for the students and they have very little say (if any) on what they are interested in studying. Most students would just trustingly deliver and live out the plans and arrangements that the family has for them without questioning, in this case, overseas education. The sole obligation students have is to excel and perform well in exams and hence, bring honour and a good name to the family. Therefore, it is not surprising that these students begin to change their ways in learning as soon as they sense the urgency to do so (i.e. during their first year of studies in Australia).

The following findings emerged when analysis was carried out on the influence of the perceived learning context on the students’ learning. Specific areas such as teaching, assessment, teacher/student relationship, workload and proficiency in the English language are discussed.

6.1.1 Teaching
In this study, the participants were less satisfied with their experience of the teaching. They felt that the lecturers/tutors would merely introduce the topics while the responsibilities rest on the students themselves to read up and learn if they desire to acquire a deeper understanding or knowledge of the subject matter. It seems that less commitment is required from the local lecturers/tutors and hence, students are urged to freely adopt their own learning approaches. The students interviewed for this study were disappointed with the ‘gap’ they perceived between the Australian teaching
styles and their own knowledge on teaching and learning. They seemed to view the teaching in Australian universities as being ineffective. Teaching effectiveness, from their perspective, is the ability of teachers to be useful, helpful and valuable in providing lasting intellectual learning via identified personal characteristics and instructional arrangements (Jahangiri and Mucciolo, 2008).

As noted by Ballard (1987), non English speaking background students often come from a traditional educational system that does not prepare them for Australian university teaching and learning approaches. Similar issues were highlighted by Li (2004) when assessing the perceptions of Asian international students studying English in New Zealand. It was noted that the problem emerges when students make a comparison with their home education, what they expected in the classroom and how they expected the teachers to deliver. Western universities generally expect students to engage in independent learning. By the time the Chinese students in the current study entered into their second year of studies, they would have had the experience of adopting independent learning approaches. Their experience in the second year of studies has further reinforced their perceptions that independent learning is expected, as some of the second year students disclosed as follows.

“The teachers here would just leave when they have done their teaching (lecture or tutorial), it is no longer their responsibility to students thereafter and hence they do expect students to be independent in their learning. Because of the attitude of the teachers, we as students have developed the ability to learn on our own, self studying.” - (CY2)

“More initiative is required from the students unlike in China, where students rely more on the teachers. In China, where the teachers would furnish students with everything the students needed but here, the teachers would merely guide the students in terms of the structure and objectives of the topics etc and students need to be self motivated
to search out the meaning and learn it up on their own. Students here would need to be more responsible to their own learning…” – (CY2)

The notion of independent learning is further emphasised by final year Chinese students, a typical example is as below.

“Here, it is very independent learning; this is what I feel strongly about compared to China. In China, the teachers would be more committed to your learning and hence willing to spend time with you. If we say the teachers in China would commit 100% to your learning, the teachers here only commit 20% or 30% in comparison. The teachers here encourage you to develop your own learning styles and be independent…” – (CY3)

It is perceived that the teaching style in Australia is significantly different from that experienced in China. The participants seem to be more responsible in managing their time and learning after experiencing the teaching styles in Australian universities. Below is an example of a final year Chinese student who confidently shares her view.

“The emphasis here is on self management, besides managing your homework, assignment and time; you need to take responsible of your own study as the teacher would not manage any of that for you. If you did not manage them well and as a result fail your exams, the teachers would not have anything to do with that. In china, the teachers would be concerned if you do not complete your homework and be actively involved and confront you about it and maybe help you draft out your study plan etc…” – (CY3)

The students in this study have appreciated the need to study independently, although arguably the Australian teaching styles seemed to have failed to cater for their needs, nor ensured that students have understood the lectures. Most
participants were ill prepared for the educational experience in Australian universities. Comparatively, tutorials appear to be more value-adding than lectures, as tutors were generally perceived to be better with their explanations. However, it could actually be because the students themselves have spent time to understand and digest the materials after the lecture and before each tutorial.

“At times, I don’t know whether it was due to my lack of understanding or if the lecture was too boring. I don’t find that I’ve benefited from it. Therefore, I depend largely on self study. There were times where I do not understand half of the lecture and at times, the entire lecture. When I reached home, I would have to go through each and every bit of the lecture by myself.” – CY1

“...the lectures are not really beneficial but tutorials are important because after lecture we would normally go home and look up the textbook and try to make sense of it and when attending tutorials, some tutors would be more detail and clear with the explanation...” – CY2

Gradually, the students recognise that they cannot rely on the lecturer/tutor and unanimously felt that the lecturer/tutor would also discourage students to depend or rely on them. In addition, they learn that the teaching staff would not spoon feed them nor show much concern if they failed to take responsibility for their learning. Eventually, some students become more self-conscious and viewed it more positively, knowing that ultimately they themselves have the full responsibility for their learning, regardless of the situation. They felt strongly that such an arrangement is part of the training provided by Australian universities to help students become independent learners. Attending lectures gives students a general overview of the issues/topics etc but they have to spend time to understand and digest the material and learn the details on their own by looking up different sources.
“…the teachers here would not want the students to rely on them. I feel that this is good. That way, it trains students in their self learning ability… because it is in Uni, students must feel that they themselves wanted to learn something.” – (CY1)

“Unlike in China where following the instructions of the teachers would be sufficient… attending lecture here only give me the feeling that I’ve just dropped by and merely did a matching of the lecturer’s power point slides with my notes. Therefore, I often have to do some soul searching by asking myself what have I learned? And what was I expected to know?” – (CY2)

When students begin to realise the need to take action and be responsible for their own learning, they start to respond accordingly. Below are some examples of how Chinese students (in year one to final year of studies) managed their learning in response to their experiences of the teaching in Australia, knowing that their previous manner of relying sorely on their teachers is no longer applicable in the Australian context.

“My self study style is to listen well in lectures… after that I must attend all tutorials and if there are queries I would approach the tutors for help. If there are still queries, I would seek help from my friends or learn things up myself. If I still can’t understand fully on my own, I would organise a few friends to study together and learn together… in China, we don’t have group discussion, all students did their work individually without much discussion… we just follow teachers’ instructions.” – (CY1)

“….prior to attending lecture, I would read through the materials and notes so to better understand what the lecturer is teaching. If you prepare before hand, you would know in advance what the lecturer is
going to teach… in China, we never do that. In China, we just listen in class. We hardly have time to preview prior to class. Most of our time was spent on revising the lessons rather than preparing for the lessons…” - (CY1)

“It is all about self learning here. The first step is to download all the lecture notes, look through the notes and if there are any unknown words or definition, I’ll look it up in the textbook and refer also to the unit guide to get a better understanding. Attending lectures would give us a general overview of the issues, we need to spend time to understand and learn up the details and content by looking up different sources.” - (CY2)

“Mainly independent kind of learning, using the given materials and notes we would learn the subject or topic on our own. Unlike in China, where the teachers would explain using their own words after they have learned up the materials themselves in order to explain to us in a simpler and more understandable manner. Here we need to do that ourselves.” - (CY2)

“I feel that reading on our own forms a large part of our learning here, the critical part of our learning is by reviewing the lecture notes.” - (CY2)

“Yeah, we have to rely on ourselves a lot, in China I would not self study but here, I had to. During lectures or tutorials, we get to roughly know the topic areas and key issues, we then need to read through the lecture notes, study guide and textbook on our own and learn it all up.” – (CY3)

“Prior to lectures and tutorials, I would go over the notes and attempt all tutorial questions prior to attending. I would also obtain the tutorial
solutions and make comparison with my own answers. For exams, I would read as much as I can and try to remember as much as I possibly can.” – (CY3)

As demonstrated above, when the Chinese students progress in their degree (from year one to final year), they learned to expect less from the lecturers and rely more on independent learning strategies. They also become more confident in their learning.

“I feel that we have more freedom in our learning here, it focuses largely on independent learning. The lecturers would touch on some main points then it is our responsibilities as students to learn it up.” – (CY2)

The view and adaptation of second year students is strongly supported by final year students.

“Indeed we depend a lot on ourselves...maybe about 80%, there are some teachers who are more elderly and would just read out the notes without much passion or interest in their teaching...guess they’re merely waiting for retirement. I feel like it does not bring any value in attending classes like that. Therefore, you could only rely entirely on yourself in those subjects.” – (CY3)

“Here there is definitely a strong focus on self study, in China we were more dependent on our teachers.” – (CY3)

There is a difference in response when comparing the experience of second and final year students (as the above-mentioned), with students who first arrived in Australia. Being in a foreign country for the very first time, these students were not used to the culture and expectations in Australian universities and they seemed lost, not knowing what to expect.
“There is no one here to control or instruct me, absolutely no one around to oversee me in my studies and hence, I have the freedom to do whatever I like. However, looking back, my first semester here was too lay back, I became too lazy. Maybe because I was not used to that, no pressure being placed on me in my studies and I was not motivated then. In my semester one here, I feel that I did not learn anything at all.”- (CY1)

“I feel that the greatest difference in the teaching styles was during my first year here not final year, by the end of the first year, I would have already adjusted to the expectation… well… I would think so anyway… When I first came, I had a lot to worry about and adapt to, although adaptation was not an issues but still as international students, we needed time to make that change. We were great followers of our teachers in China and all of a sudden, we need to be our own leaders in our studies… be independent learner… in this final year, I find that I’m fine, I’ve got used to things.”- (CY3)

As the Chinese students become more confident in their learning approaches, a minority of the students begin to adjust their views in valuing their experience. However, the majority of the final year Chinese students still view teaching negatively, despite their adaptation to the Australian environment. There are a few final year students in this study who started to find lectures and tutorials making more sense, enjoyable and value-adding, compared to students in their initial years. They view the teaching somewhat less negatively; they now see the teaching in a slightly different light; and they regard the teaching more relevant and useful to their future. This is consistent with the work of Lee and Lodewijks (1995), which concluded that students who did enjoy their experience were those in final year, as they were more ready to change their learning approaches than students in their initial years. Below are some
examples from final year Chinese students who started to appreciate the different approach to teaching in Australia.

“I feel that the quality here is not that bad and what the lecturer teaches would be most helpful and useful for our future, not just book knowledge. So...when we do our own study, I could picture the practicality of it and very naturally would apply the scenario and theory rather than studying in a very rigid manner. The adoption of case studies in their teaching has enabled us to apply the relevant issues and hence easier for us to understand too.” – (CY3)

“I now begin to enjoy the lecture here as there are lots of current issues or practical sides to it where the lecturers would relate current news to the topics we study. Unlike in China where teachers relied on the textbook itself, here they apply industry examples and real life scenario to the lessons which makes it more interesting. Further, some of the lecturers would have been in the industry themselves or are currently practicing accountants and hence have the experience of what they are teaching. The lecturers are also fairly humorous in their teaching.” – (CY3)

6.1.2 Assessment
As Chinese students experience the assessment tasks in Australian universities, they seem to appreciate the context and adjust their learning accordingly. Students who have been in Australia for some time also began to recognise that emphasis should not be placed on particular topics only while neglecting others, as all topics are of equal importance and may be assessed differently. Below are examples of the students’ response towards their perceptions of the assessment,

“As to how I study for exam, well I would attempt all the tutorial questions. To me, exams focus more on tutorial questions as there is
no guidance on the key areas I do not know how else to revise... so I would focused on practicing the tutorial questions... at times, I would memorise the theories or certain key areas that needed to be memorised, regardless of whether I understand them...” – (CY1)

“In the final exams, although the teachers here would not tell you the details or key areas like the way in China, we could practice on past exams... at the end of the day, when revising for exams we still need to cover all areas as each topic consists of different issues... hence as it turned out, there are no key areas...”- (CY1)

“I find that although listening attentively in class is important and useful, here I can’t rely too much on the teachers as I need to source out things myself... it depends largely on self study... once I have an idea of the lessons, attempting tutorial questions and other assignments would help me to remember the lessons better and apply the lessons...” – (CY1)

“Because of the assignments, we need to read through the textbook and understand it well... it forces you to be on top of things, it also encourages students to study together.” – (CY2)

“Exam is still important so in preparation for it, I would go through the materials such as lecture notes, textbook, other supplementary notes, tutorial questions and past exams many times. If I can’t remember some issues the first time around, I will go through it the second time, or the third or fourth time until I can remember them. I will repeat this process many times. I would also make my own notes. Using my own words, I would summarise all the key points of each topic or chapter.” – (CY3)
Although tests and exams remain the preferred mode of assessment by the students, they also accept and acknowledge the need for other modes of assessment. Assignments and other assessments become more popular where students can learn to source out information, decide on the appropriateness of the materials and read up extensively before attempting the assignments. It also encourages students to engage in peer learning, be responsible in arranging their own learning and independent in seeking knowledge. Students find assignments, oral presentations and group work essential for them to acquire the core competencies needed to meet future job expectations. For example, students find that group work helps to develop skills such as research and communication, besides learning to work with each other and be good time and task managers. In the initial stage (students in their first year), group work was the most challenging to Chinese students, as they have never been exposed or required to submit such work in China. Therefore, most students would attempt the group work separately or individually without much discussion or planning and changes were only made when individual work was put together as a group assignment. Nonetheless, subsequently it was perceived as a learning process by the students (second and final year students), as they gradually sharpen their skills in group work.

The training provided by the assessments to think critically and analytically and develop opinions and conclusions, are seen as most valuable by the students in their learning in Australia. More importantly, they begin to enjoy and appreciate that there is so much more in learning than for the sake of exams. They find assessments such as assignments very practical, industry-related and most relevant to their future. The learning here was seen as current, practical and useful, as compared to the textbook-like learning they previously experienced in China.

“I feel that here the assessment is different. If students really work on the assignments, it becomes like a process of one’s learning…prior to the assignment, I have not learned, when I allocate some time to complete and understand the given assignments I could then learn up
the materials slowly, exploring and discussing with friends and eventually be able to fully understand the topics and hence it is just natural that I’ll be able to answer those assignment questions. I like this way of learning.” – (CY1)

“For example, in one of the accounting assignments, we had to contact a real operating company to research on. It concentrated on the practical aspect of things rather than just the theory in the textbook, I’ve learned to be more inquisitive…asking questions and trying to find the solutions, confidently approaching and presenting my views too…I’ve never done that before in China” – (CY1)

‘I feel that I learn more with the different types of assessments here, it does not only focus on textbook knowledge but with the use of case studies it connects to real life…a more well rounded approach to learning. I learn to look up the internet for current issues and information, visit the library and reading up reference books rather than relying only on textbook and teachers. I think I’m a more active learner.”- (CY2)

“I have to read a lot of books, search for lots of materials when doing an assignment or research essay. We have no previous experience in research and further, no one ever taught us how to approach this type of assignment… I feel that I’m capable of doing it myself and I’ve benefited greatly from it...” – (CY3)

It was noted by the students that the exposure to such internal assessments had enabled them to organise their study better, meeting deadlines and tasks requirements, as well as sharpening their team spirit when working on group assignments. The opportunity to develop such skills helped them to mature as a responsible person and consequently prepared them for the workforce.
“Here, you have to depend on yourselves on how to learn and how to pass. You become more conscientious in your own learning. You got to force yourself to learn unlike in China where the teachers would force you to learn. One’s ability to learn on his own would improve, one would also be more responsible on what to study each week, what assignment to hand in and be more disciplined. I would pen down in my diary when assignments, projects are due hence start planning ahead when to commence, what to do and making sure that I hand them in on time…this I find very different from my learning in China.” – (CY1)

“We get to learn a lot of things outside the textbook, things like time management, meeting dead lines…without being reminded by teachers… these are important for our future.” – (CY3)

6.1.3 Teacher/Student relationship

A study conducted by Tan and Simpson (2008) on Chinese students’ educational experience in New Zealand has demonstrated that one of the critically important factors regarded by the students is friendliness and helpfulness of academic staff. According to the study, the students ‘appear to be saying that their relationship with their university and its staff was relatively more important than the content of their courses or the quality of their degree.’ (p. 104). However, despite the importance placed on such a factor, it is found that the students in this study did not have a good experience with the academic staff. The majority of the students who shared their many negative experiences have formed the opinion that the lecturers/tutors are not as friendly or helpful as they seemed or anticipated.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 3, the literature has indicated that the teachers in most Asian countries are expected to take on the responsibility to lead their students both academically and morally. The relationship between teachers and
students is often viewed as similar to the relationship between parents and children. Such a relationship is part of the influence of Confucian values (Chan, 1999; Heffernan et al., 2010) and it is hierarchical. As a result, the learning environment in China emphasises teacher-centred teaching or dependent learning, where students would rely extensively on their teachers in acquiring knowledge and skill besides their dependency on them for advice on personal matters. However, such dependency or relationships, which are normally formed outside the classroom, are neither the norm nor culture in Australian universities. This mismatch in expectations has become a barrier to the students in developing communication with their Australian lecturers/tutors. Further, as Confucian values emphasise modesty (Kirkbride and Tang, 1992), Chinese students generally are less likely to ask for support, even when they don’t understand certain concepts (Chan, 1991). As such, students asserted that they study on their own and discuss among their peers when they have failed to understand certain issues. They would work hard when exams approach, especially when they have not kept abreast during the semester and they often do not seek help from the lecturers/tutors, due to their less positive experience and perceptions of them. Below are examples of the less positive experience and response of students in their first, second and final year of studies. By the time the students reach their final year of studies, they become more independent in their approaches to learning.

“In the past, I always felt that if the teachers are kind and good to me, I will not want to disappoint them in my learning and hence would strive my best in my learning. I would work extra hard to get good results and bring honour to them... but that does not apply here. Here, I study for myself not for the teachers as I don’t know any of them personally.” – (CY1)

“I don’t even know the names of my current lecturer and tutor… seldom approach them for help, they don’t realise that at times we may be struggling, guess that’s not their problem… since the teachers here don’t care so... we have to take extra care in our studies… I just study
on my own, make sure that I’m following the weekly schedule well… what to read and what tutorial questions to attempt….” – (CY1)

“Other than solving tutorial questions, there is no connection with the teachers here. At times, instead of approaching the teachers, I would rather read it up and try to solve it on my own if I can.” – (CY2)

“Here it is wholly self dependent, self study… I would rely on my own to do lots of self studying, very seldom do I seek help from the teachers.”– (CY3)

“Although I don’t have much contact with the teachers here, majority of the learning is self dependent, so that’s ok… the lectures notes are very useful. It guides you on the objectives of each topic, hence I could read up the materials and understand them in my own time.” – (CY3)

“You can’t rely on the teachers here… you have to be responsible for your own learning. Although the teachers may be very professional, that has nothing to do with you personally.” – (CY3)

6.1.4 Workload
In general, the Chinese students felt that although the workload itself (in terms of homework or assessment task requirements) was much lighter to that in China, they actually spent more time than anticipated on their studies. One of the reasons is the limited English vocabulary they possess and hence a considerable amount of time was required for them to understand and digest the materials via checking the dictionary for meanings. It was a tiring task to continuously check up the meanings before they could see the big picture or make sense of the materials as a whole. Some students believe they spent more time in their studies than the local students, while others would concentrate in their studies regardless of the amount of workload.
“When I first came, to read one page I spent two hours… basically there was not much I could recognise.” – (CY1)

“I feel that because of my low level of English skills, I needed to spend more time in my studies when compared to other students. Maybe the local students only needed to spend two hours to read up while I needed to spend six hours instead just to be on the same level of understanding with them. Hence I spent a lot of time to read and understand.” – (CY1)

“Maybe the locals would have learned everything during class time and hence need not spend too much time after lecture or tutorials to revise… but for us, we would not be able to acquire or understand all that is taught in the lecture and tutorial, therefore, I need to spend time on my own to read and understand them. I’ve developed stronger self dependency skills… doing the reading on my own without being told, searching out meaning and understanding things.” – (CY2)

“Well…we’re here to study, therefore regardless of the amount of work given to us, we just have to complete them. You just have to keep practicing the questions, attempt all tutorial questions, assignments, reading and at times memorise the materials for exams.” – (CY2)

Some students argued that if the learning was conducted in their own language (Mandarin), the workload might have been much lighter and easier. Once again, as mentioned earlier, the findings seemed to highlight that the only major draw-back for Chinese students in their learning in Australian universities is English language. To mitigate this disadvantage, some students employ short term memorisation as an option, especially when preparing for exams and this is especially the case for first year students.
“Coz the level of difficulties in the materials that we learn is not great compared to what we had in China... but because they are all in English, I had to memorise even if I don't understand... well for exams at least.” – (CY1)

“I forced myself to memorise certain terms or points purely for the exams, a week or a month prior to the exam I would keep on memorising the terms or jargon then after the exams I would not remember it anymore.”- (CY1)

Gradually these students begin to be more responsible and mature, making the necessary adjustments in their own learning, spending time more appropriately and being more committed as well. Below are some typical perceptions and response of second and final year students.

“If you're self disciplined, which you need to be over here, you would be conscientious and review all your work. You will think of a better way to study or plan out your learning. In China, there is no time for such thing, it was not possible to assess your own learning, whether you're effective in your learning approach or style etc due to the enormous amount of work load. Here, since the workload is lighter, all this can be done.”- (CY2)

“With the amount of spare time on hand, we could afford to read in advance some of the chapters and topics and revise on previous ones hence stay on top of our studies. That way, we could also better prepare for the final exams.” – (CY3)

In addition, some students find the workload seemingly heavier than the allocated load itself, due to the other commitments they have as international students, which they never had to deal with when in China.
“Here in Australia, we need to pay rental, bill, prepare meals, clean the house etc… we never do all those things in China, not trained in those things… therefore, although the workload in itself is not as heavy but we have more commitments, not just in our studies and hence I find that when we add them all up, as an international student… my load is heavy.” – (CY2)

“I find that I can’t really compare the workload in China with that in Australia… although the amount of workload is greater in China… but as a student you don’t have any other commitments such as cooking, cleaning, working etc... however, here in Melbourne, although the study load is a lot lighter comparatively… there are other things that you need to pay attention to such as improving your English language, organise your meals, paying bills etc... at times I feel that the burden is great.”- (CY3)

Ultimately, students take up the responsibility to learn independently, organising and prioritising the tasks that are expected of them. Many of them do realise that they need to put in extra effort in their learning at tertiary level.

6.1.5 English language
It appears that the listening and understanding skills of the students in this study failed to equip them for extended native-speaker delivery in Australian lecture/tutorial contexts. Such a finding is also captured in the study by Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000), who observed that nearly one quarter of the non English speaking background students did not understand much of the lecture at all. This is further supported by a study conducted by Du-Babcock (2002) on Hong Kong students, whose listening skills were not adequately developed to sustain a 50 minute lecture of a native English speaker. In that study, students were confused when the teachers departed from
lecture notes and overheads and began to employ humour and examples to enrich their teaching. Therefore, students would resort to adopting the strategies of depending on same-culture classmates, pre-reading, highlighting and marking rather than note-taking (Flowerdew and Miller, 1992; Holmes, 2004). Also observed in the research by Gan (2009) on Chinese students studying in an Australian high school, second language issues were identified as a major factor which holds students back from asking questions in class.

As discussed in the previous chapter, listening and understanding the accent and culturally specific idioms of their lecturers/tutors was a challenge to the students in this study. To mitigate their inadequacy in the English language, students claimed that they put extra effort and time into their learning. They acknowledge the importance of listening attentively in class and being committed to reading and being active in their learning. As a student described, “listening is to know and reading is to understand”, yet most are reluctant to seek help from lecturers/tutors when in doubt. This is partly due to the fear of not being able to express themselves clearly and hence become a nuisance or seemingly annoy the lecturers/tutors, who had little time to spare. Therefore, some students would rather seek help from their peers to understand the materials and they believe it did pay off, as they managed to perform well in their exams.

Some felt that they did not manage to improve their English level since coming to Australia and they see no connection between studying and the English language, as they find themselves passing exams even without adequate English skills. Instead, what appears to be more critical to them is having good memory skills. To satisfy the practical aspects of exams, these students would concentrate on repeatedly practising all the tutorial questions. On the other hand, if the exam is perceived as more theoretical, they would then memorise the materials. According to Chan (1999), traditionally Chinese students view quality learning as one that involves memorisation. Entwistle and Tait (1994) noted that Chinese students focus on memorisation as part of a deeper learning process. Therefore, those who are good in calculations and
possess a good memory would have little problem in performing well in their accounting exams, despite their low English level.

“English language in itself is an issue, hence in some areas we would memorise. We had no choice, therefore even if we do not understand we would still memorise it for the exams.” – (CY2)

In addition, students learn to be more prepared for lectures and tutorials as they try to compensate for their lack of proficiency in the English language, through effort and self help approach. Students would become more academically engaged. They would read through the lecture materials repetitively to gain an understanding prior to attending lectures and revise the materials again after the lectures to reinforce understanding. Having previewed the notes before a lecture, gives the Chinese students the scope or coverage of the topics and the meaning of foreign terminology or words, prior to the lecture. Below are some examples of how students in their first, second and final year would respond to their weakness in English language.

“I would read the text over and over again prior to attending lectures. When I do that, my listening skills would seemed to have improved when attending lecture because I’ve read through the materials and have a fair idea of what is going on. I normally would follow up with revising the materials after the lectures, it helps a lot.” - (CY1)

“When previewing the materials prior to lectures I would highlight the areas that I do not understand… and when those areas are mentioned in lecture, I would be extra attentive, seeking to understand it. If I do not understand it, I would query it immediately. If the explanation is unclear, I would go home and attempt some questions, discuss with my friends...” – (CY1)
“If I am able to understand everything that is taught in lecture via listening, my life would be much easier. My problem is that I could not understand the lecture via listening and hence to compensate I have to read up on my own and spend time to understand it.” – (CY1)

“I also spent a lot of time in my studies because my English is not good enough. If I wanted to make more sense of the lecture, I would preview the lecture materials prior to the lecture. In that case, I would be able to understand a little bit more in the lecture.” – (CY2)

“In order to do well in accounting studies, I feel that it depends largely on the efforts you put in throughout your studies. To improve your reading, you need to read more and to improve your listening, you need to attend lectures and tutorials more.” – (CY3)

“I need to prepare prior to attending classes and revise after classes, which help to enhance my understanding. In attending tutorials, if you've done your work, the tutor basically would help you to be more organised and elaborate or touch on some issues which you might not be familiar with or explain more in depth the things that you are not clear. As a student, I just need to focus or concentrate on the issues that I do not already know. The tutor will go through many things but you need to know what you do not know and focus there, basically knowing the area which you need to focus.” – (CY3)

Having had the experience of the educational context in Australia, some final year students recognise that although they might not be as proficient in the English language, they could still perform well academically with the use of some appropriate study techniques. Below are some examples of the learning approach of final year students.
“When I have difficulties understanding the lecturers or tutors, I would go home and do my own reading, I would read through the materials many times until I’m able to understand. If I still do not understand fully, I would ask my friends to explain them to me… I will not give up until I’ve understood.” – (CY3)

“English is important but not the most important in the exam. In the exam, the most important is the understanding of the issues or topics, the key areas questioned. It is crucial that you can understand what the questions are asking and can answer the questions. As for English, as long as the examiner or the person who marks your exam can understand what you write then that is good enough.” – (CY3)

“I feel that in exam, it is not to test our English level, we are still able to handle the exam. The focus in exam is more on issues or theories and as long as we are able to apply the theories into the questions and understand what the questions are asking then it is ok. It is not as difficult as writing an essay. That is, if you are confident in the subject you’ve studied, in exam the small amount of writing is ok. English language will not impact too greatly on our exams. If we can’t express ourselves fully, we just write in simpler manner, say dot point form, write clearly and with the use of highlighters. As long as the examiners could understand the way we think, that is ok.” - (CY3)

In summary, this chapter has looked at the influence of the Australian learning context on Mainland Chinese students’ learning from the students’ own perspectives. It reveals the changes Mainland Chinese students experienced during their studies and the challenges they faced. Following on from this chapter, the next chapter will discuss the overall findings, along with Ramsden’s model as presented in earlier chapters.
Chapter 7

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter provides an overall discussion and consideration of the implications of the findings. It examines Ramsden’s model of a student’s learning context on Mainland Chinese students. It also discusses and reflects on the response and changes in learning adopted by the participants as a result of their perceptions and educational experience in Australia.

7.1 STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE LEARNING CONTEXT

Individual’s perceptions generally affect their attitudes and it is not surprising that students’ perceptions of the learning and teaching experience influence their attitude towards education and subsequently the qualities they respect in it (Ferreira and Santoso, 2008). This section covers Mainland Chinese students’ experience and ultimately their perceptions of the learning context in Australia as depicted in figure 7.1. It is discussed in the following order: teaching, assessment, teacher/student relationship, workload and English language. It is useful at this point to reiterate that because the interactions between the researcher and the participants were conducted in Mandarin, the study is able to uncover some important revelations which might otherwise not be possible if the study was administered by a Western researcher. Being an Asian, the researcher was regarded by the participants as one of them and therefore they felt most at ease and confident to speak their mind.
7.1.1 Teaching
Drawn from the schooling experience in China, where the teaching appeared to be highly structured, teachers were clear and detailed in their explanations, extremely responsible, persistently and meticulously guiding the participants in their studies, the perceptions of the teaching in Australia, by comparison, seem less satisfying. Such a low assessment of the teaching in Australia is partially attributed to the participants' inability to understand the teaching as a result of their English proficiency. The work by Grayson (2007) also reflects this finding where the researcher explains that Asian students with a non-English speaking background are generally less able in comprehending what was going on in the classroom. Despite students' inability to understand the teaching, they are less likely to voice their opinions or seek support,
especially during class. This is due to the influence of Confucian values that emphasise respect and harmony, where Chinese students are careful not to offend the lecturers/tutor (Chan, 1999; Kirkbride and Tang, 1992).

The only positive assessments of the teaching were concerning its practical, relevant and industry-related aspects of the subject matter, which emphasise on building knowledge instead of passing exams. Other than that, most participants across all year levels see the teaching in Australia as being ineffective and poor in quality and the lectures in particular were not value-adding. According to Ferreira and Santoso (2008), accounting students generally bring with them some negative perceptions of the subjects, particularly in regard to the nature and role of an accountant. As evident in the findings, the overall teaching quality is seen to be below expectations, as explanations were unclear and the academic staff were generally perceived as irresponsible because of the disinterest displayed in their teaching, as well as in the students. Further examples include instances where the lecturers/tutors were disoriented, jumped between unrelated sections or read through the lecture slides verbatim without offering much explanation etc.

Despite the poor teaching, cultural differences also contribute to the unpleasant views held by the participants. For example, discussion or opinion-seeking as part of the teaching was foreign to the participants; however these practices are most commonly exercised in lectures/tutorials in Australia. As Hammond and Gao (2002) explained, knowledge in the Western educational systems is generally co-constructed through a dialogic learning model via teacher-student and student-student communication, rather than being passively absorbed by students in a dialectic or traditional learning model. This commonly practiced dialogic learning model in the Western environment is described as “….holistic, interactive, cooperative and diversified, emphasising critical thinking, real time evaluation, hands on experience and overall education quality” (Hammond and Gao 2002, p. 228).
Students’ reminiscence of their past experience coupled with unfamiliarity and unawareness of the teaching and learning practices in Australia, is another example of cultural differences which lends itself to the misunderstanding of the teaching objectives in developing certain skills in students (such as independence in seeking out answers or taking up the responsibility to learn). For example, the participants interpret the teaching as unhelpful when the academic staff refused to stay back to address students’ queries, or when they fail to ensure students have understood their delivery. Such differences and mismatches in expectations, and the ignorance on the part of the participants in this study, further adds to the confusion and disappointment of the teaching experienced.

As indicated across all year levels, an alarm is raised concerning the quality of teaching. This troubling phenomenon needs urgent attention, especially as universities are in the pursuit of academic excellence. One of the possible reasons for the bad teaching as perceived by the participants in this study, is the recent very strong emphasis on research by academic staff to the extent of downplaying the teaching quality by universities. The work of Watty (2006) suggests that the quality in accounting education has decreased over the years. The notion of ‘publish or perish’ has unknowingly forced academic staff to focus predominately on publication of research articles, which has become a common key performance indicator in staff annual performance review and used as a criteria to promotion. There should be a balance in emphasis; research is paramount and so is teaching. Moreover, to maintain good teaching quality or even improve the situation, attention needs to be taken in the selection of full time academic staff, not only that, the recruitment of appropriate part time lecturers/tutors should also not be taken lightly, it is not only necessary but crucial that all the academics have both the experience and knowledge in the subjects they teach.

In addition, it is also essential that academics undergo training and attend teaching and learning seminars on topics such as the art of teaching. ‘Peer review’ or an independent teaching and learning adviser sitting in during lectures/tutorials, with the
aim of giving constructive feedback to lecturers/tutors on ways to improve the teaching quality, would also be useful. In particular, it is argued that it would also be beneficial if academics are briefed on and made aware of some of the possible cultural differences in international students’ learning and hence conduct their teaching accordingly, in order to help ease the students into the Western educational environment. As suggested by Wang and Shan (2007), Australian academics should adapt their pedagogical practices in an attempt to consider international students’ needs.

7.1.2 Assessment

Coming from a highly competitive, stressful and exam-oriented educational culture in China, the different forms of assessment offered in Australia is one of the least problematic contexts among other variables of interest explored in this study. As alerted by Watty et al., (2010), there are relatively limited studies done on how assessment practices influence students’ learning quality, especially from the standpoint of the students (see Sambell et al., 1997; Struyven et al., 2005; Slater, 1996). Therefore, assessment as a variable of interest investigated here enables a better understanding of how students view assessment and the influence it has on their learning.

In this study, although most types of assessment were new to the students when they first arrived in Australia (except exams and tests), students were most receptive to the different modes of assessments expected of them. They are positive about the different types of assessments offered, such as assignments (both individual and group), essay writing, oral presentations, multiple-choice tests etc., as it eases the pressure from the examination. One of the possible reasons of such positive perception could be explained by the empowerment students feel with the given assessments. Harvey (2004) defines empowerment as the development of knowledge, skills and abilities in the learner to enable them to control and develop their own learning. The work of Zraa et al., (2011) demonstrated that empowered students are more motivated to carry out expected tasks. The researches also
indicated that empowered learners normally find the expected tasks more meaningful and they would also feel more competent in performing the tasks.

In addition, the participants in this study view the exposure to these assessments as crucial and helpful in developing the much needed skills they lack for their future, such as team work, time management, organisational and presentation skills etc. They regard these core competencies to be essential and practical and are skills that they were unable to acquire through textbook learning under their previous assessment system in China. Such finding is consistent with the work of Sambell et al., (1997) which found that students are in favour of alternative assessment (including portfolios, reflective journals, work-placed case studies, self- and peer-assessment tasks) instead of traditional assessment (which is characterised by both essay examination and multiple choice examination) as the former promotes understanding and quality learning. Similar conclusion is also observed in the study by Struyven et al., (2005).

However, interestingly despite the acknowledgement of the importance of such skills and training via internal assessments, their focus remains with passing the final examinations. A possible reason lies with the enforcement of exam hurdles in most accounting subjects. In other words, one has to pass the exam in order to obtain an overall pass grade (or higher) in the subject examined, regardless of how well one has performed in internal assessments. Further, internal assessments in accounting subjects normally contribute less to the total marks when compared to final exams. Given that with exams, students’ knowledge of the subjects is accessed independently, the participants are concerned with their difficulties or inability to express themselves fully in English. The study by Watty et al., (2010) has placed great emphasis on students’ English competency as the most crucial factor that would impact on students’ completion of required assessment tasks. Unlike internal assessments where the participants were able to discuss with their peers, rehearse any oral presentations repeatedly, or prepare several drafts of essays before final submission, students are under time constraints during exams. Therefore, although
they enjoy the internal assessments, they continued to place exams as the highest priority. As anticipated, the students in their first year of studies were more anxious with exam preparation compared to students in their second and final year, who have learned to be more independent in exam preparations. It is not surprising that memorising is also commonly employed by students in preparation for exams. This is especially the case when it comes to exam questions on definitions, terms or accounting jargons, which students find difficult discussing using their own words.

7.1.3 Teacher/student relationship
Besides teaching, this teacher/student relationship variable receives the most criticism from the Chinese students. Although, on face value, most teaching staff in Australia may seem friendly as they are polite and smile at the students, interaction between the teaching staff and the students was lacking and so is the teacher/student relationship. The experience of the Chinese students seems to suggest that there is a lack of support from academic staff and the relationship the students have with their lecturer or tutor (if any) is much more distant, where students have to be proactive in seeking out help. This supports the findings by Christie et al., (2008) on college students’ experiences in university life. Most students don’t even know the names of their lecturers or tutors and, disappointingly, it is perceived that the lecturers and tutors were not interested to get to know the students and hence failed to initiate the communication expected and yearned for by the students. This is contrary to the practice and experience of Chinese students in their home country. In fact, the findings reveal that Chinese students have a very close relationship with their teachers in China. The teachers are highly regarded and respected by students as they are very responsible and cared greatly for their students, like a parent towards a child (Ward et al., 2001). Overwhelmed by the attention and concern of their teachers, the Chinese students would reciprocate by putting in extra effort in their studies in order to obtain good grades as a form of gratitude towards the teachers. Bringing with them such a unique experience of the relationship students have with their teachers in China, they felt neglected and ignored by the Australian educators.
The participants disappointingly acknowledge that the relationship with their lecturers/tutors in Australia is close to nil. Some of the reasons for such mismatch include the following:

- Limited contact time - the academics are seen to have little time to spare or, at times, are unwilling to spend time with the participants. Coming from a background where the teachers are very willing to spend time with the students outside contact hours, the academics in Australia generally will only meet with students by appointment. However, the culture in China seems to relate appointments to a formal meeting, which the participants in this study consider unfriendly. Further, not knowing the actual reasons behind a lecturer/tutor heading off right after a lecture/tutorial could also account for the misunderstanding students may have of the academics. An example is the notion that the academics are uninterested in helping them with queries after class or unwilling to get to know them. It has been reported that due to increasing workloads, pressure on research and higher staff to student ratios, academics are unable to, or are disinterested in, helping international students, especially when it is anticipated that they would require extra time and resources (Ballard, 1987; Massaro, 2004; O’Kane, 2001).

Although it may be true for some academics, for others it could be just a misinterpretation. To prevent such misconceptions from continuing, academics could set aside designated times and explain or highlight it to the students. Nonetheless, it is a fact that academics have many responsibilities, in both teaching and research, and hence often have little time to spare. For instance, some academics at RMIT university are expected to take on offshore teaching (in Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Vietnam), admin duties etc., on top of their existing teaching as the university has international commitments. With the little spare time academics have, research is the next important task they
are expected to undertake. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that students, at the receiving end, are able to notice the difference.

- Size of lectures – Huge lecture halls can also contribute to the difficulties Mainland Chinese students face in clarifying uncertainties and hence reduce the opportunities for teacher/student contact. The ‘face’ issue often prevents the students, especially those from a non-English speaking background, from asking questions in class (Hellsten and Prescott, 2004), let alone in a lecture. Therefore, it would help if lectures are replaced with smaller classes or seminars with a size of no more than 40 students. The size of approximately 40 students in a class is commonly experienced by students from non-English speaking backgrounds such as the Chinese (Turner and Acker, 2002). Although this might seem impractical and not cost effective for universities, it is a measure that could improve teaching and learning quality for all students.

- Barriers to Communication – this is one of the key areas that prevent the development of teacher-student relationships, which the participants longed for. Generally, Chinese students are less confident in approaching the lecturers/tutors due to their English level; they often have difficulties expressing themselves clearly. One of the reasons is due to the fear of loss of face. English as a variable of interest is further discussed in section 7.1.5 below.

- Cultural differences – to show respect in the Chinese Collectivist culture (Hofstede, 2001), one will only speak when one is spoken or invited to. This is especially the case when the other party is higher in the social hierarchy than oneself, such as a teacher. This is in contrast to the Western culture of individualism (Jackson et al., 2006a), which centres on equal rights and an individual’s rights, where students are not only encouraged but expected to challenge the teachers and speak their minds uninvited and liberally. Without such awareness, it is difficult for individuals from a different culture to understand each other and develop a relationship and this is the case with the
participants in this study. Further, in the Chinese tradition, teachers are often portrayed as a model for students to emulate and hence respect and thus, the behaviour, attitude and actions of the teachers have to hold up to such an expectation. This is far from the case in the Western environment, which can often lead to confusion and hindrance to a possible teacher/students relationship. To bridge the cultural gap, creating awareness is therefore inevitable and it is essential for educational institutions to understand their students who are from a different culture and hold different cultural values from their own. One suggestion is to organise international days where individuals (both academics and students) are able to interact and present their own culture to others.

In addition to creating awareness during orientations or cultural days to address the mismatch in expectations and misunderstanding of cultures, the respective schools or faculty could set up clubs that comprises the teachers and the students, such as an accounting students association to promote support and understanding. Such an organisation could be extended further to include alumni members and potential employers in the industry, to demonstrate the supportive climate of the school towards its students.

7.1.4 Workload

As unanimously asserted by all the participants, the experience of the workload in China is most stressful and unpleasant. It is excessive, demanding and unreasonable. The reason for such an overloading of the workload on students has its root in the Chinese culture with its emphasis on effort rather than ability (Lee 1996; Han, 2005). It is commonly believed and embraced that in order to perform well in the final exams, endless attempts on exercises and homework are inevitable. In contrast, the workload in Australia is seen to be at the opposite end of the spectrum. The perceptions of the students on workload appear to be rather consistent within the year levels. It ranges from very light to students in their first year to just right or reasonable to second and final year students. Consequently, some students felt unmotivated and lacked self-
discipline, since there was no one to remind or instruct them on their studies and this is especially the case for first year students. This is also due partly to the students’ inability to manage for themselves the amount of freedom and time they have when they first arrive in Australia. As they progress through the semesters, students begin to realise, adjust and acquire the skills to organise their time more appropriately and hence view the workload to be more reasonable. In fact, if not for the language barrier, the workload would seem to be even more manageable and enjoyable to the students. The students’ lack of proficiency in the English language would therefore contribute to the greater amount of time spent on their studies and hence increase their workload indirectly.

7.1.5 English language
This is seen as the biggest hurdle for Mainland Chinese students studying in Australian universities. English language is often the second or third language for the Chinese students and hence it is very challenging for them to understand and learn in English, especially when they first arrive. As Miller (2007, p. 747) suggested, ‘….listening to lectures in a second language is an arduous task’; the amount of concentration required in a lecture is taxing enough in one’s first language, let alone second or third language. Consistent with the work of Choi (1997) and Mills (1997), it is found that other difficulties non-English background students encounter are the speed of speech and the use of slang, which impede their understanding and ability to take notes. In addition, it is also reported by Ramsay et al., (1999) that some of the common difficulties that first year international students face at an Australian university include, but are not limited to, understanding the vocabulary and speed used in lectures and when tutors spoke too fast or gave too little input.

Further, the unfamiliar and various English accents, idiomatic styles, humour and choice of examples in lecture/tutorials often pose problems for the students. Further, English learnt and spoken in Asian countries can be quite different from English spoken in Australia (Kell and Vogl, 2007; Burns, 1991). It is worth pointing out that although non-English speaking background students may understand some
academics, they may not understand all academics (Kaputin, 1993). This is consistent with the work of Andrade (2006) who claimed that ethno-cultural diversity will affect students’ perceptions of the learning context in the form of the socio-cultural adjustment issues they encounter in adapting to the host country’s method of teaching and learning. This includes the different educational expectations, use of English language and also the foreign accents, as many lecturers in Australia themselves have English as their second or third language.

However, interestingly, despite the participants’ apparent inadequacy in the English language, they claimed to have performed reasonably well in their accounting studies. Some possible reasons include, either the students have understated their abilities in the language or the nature of accounting itself focuses more on technical aspects that are not so dependent on English fluency. It could also be that the design of assessments and structure in accounting subjects have failed to capture the quality expected in accounting students. The latter reasoning seems more appropriate in this case. As evident in the study by De Lange et al., (2006) on accounting graduates’ perceptions of the important skills in their courses, it was found that although generic skills such as written communication skills were rated as highly important, there was a gap between such a perception and the focus given to these skills in the subjects taught.

There are numerous studies such as Jackson (2009), BIHECC (2007), Jackson et al., (2006b), Birrell (2006b) and more recently Awayiga, Onumah and Tsamenyi (2010), which continue to report on the concerns of employers on the attributes or generic skills of business graduates. According to Jackson et al., (2006b), the graduate employers in their study cited English language and professional communication skills as areas in urgent need of attention. This is strongly supported by Hancock et al., (2009) in their Accounting for the Future study, where the researchers identified the non-technical skills that are highly sought after in graduates includes communication skills, in all its forms. Communication skills are not only necessary but are seen to be crucially important for an accountant to fulfil workplace expectations and requirements.
Research shows that despite the emphasis on communication skills by employers and professional bodies, universities appear to continue in educating a large number of accounting graduates who fail to communicate at a satisfactory level (Kennelly et al., 2010; Birrell, 2006a). Further, a survey conducted by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) in 2004, found that 43 per cent of graduate international students, Mainland Chinese in particular, had IELTS scores of only band 5.0 (Birrell et al., 2006, p. 112). This score lies well below the defined entry-level requirements of virtually all Australian tertiary institutions. Therefore, it is imperative that educators in universities recognise and address such issues urgently.

As a result of the challenges Mainland Chinese students face in using English in Australia, their perception of the contexts such as teaching, assessment, teacher/students relationship and workload are also affected. As noted by several researchers, difficulty with English is a common cause for issues that arise due to students' ignorance of the nature of the educational and social environment and the manner of communication and behaviour (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991a; Zhao, 1995). It provides a likely explanation as to why some teachers are considered ineffective, or not understandable, which in fact is attributed partly to the students' poor listening skills. Assessments could also appear more demanding, as some students lack the writing skills needed. This is why Chinese students tend to pay more attention to exam preparation, as they fear being unable to express themselves clearly in exams and so at times resort to memorising certain phrases or paragraphs verbatim and regurgitate it during exams.

It also helps explain the preference the students have with group assignments where assessment is based on a combined effort compared to an individual assignment. This is consistent with the study by Selvarajah (2006), who claimed that Asian students' background and their lack of proficiency in the English language are reasons why group assignments are preferred. Students' lack of proficiency in the English language and hence confidence to initiate conversations with the academics is also a
contributing factor to the unsuccessful establishment of the teaching/student relationship. Some students are reluctant to approach the teaching staff for help for fear of not being understood, as they have difficulties expressing themselves clearly. As such, they prefer to seek help from their peers and participate in study groups. This reluctance also offers an explanation as to why some Chinese students fail to participate actively in class discussion. With the seemingly poor English speaking skills, some students also fear being laughed at or losing face in front of the class, and hence only seek individual consultation with the academics after the class.

In short, difficulties in the English language appear to be the key context which contributes to the less satisfying educational experience that Mainland Chinese students have in Australian universities. Such a finding is also evident in the work by Li et al., (2002). One of the possible reasons which contributes to such an unsatisfactory educational experience in Australia is the change in the universities themselves in recent years. More precisely, international students who come to Australia, anticipating the 'western' educational experience such as having native English-speaking Australian lecturers, will be in for a disappointment for many. More often then not, they would find the lecturers to be of a different nationality such as Indian, Sri Lankan or Bangladeshi, to what they had initially expected (native Australian) and hence the different English accents. For example, in the School of Accounting, Economics and Finance (at Deakin University) alone, there are more than 20 different nationalities among the lecturers. Therefore, it is not surprising that the participants find this a challenging issue.

Further, such dissatisfaction about the learning experienced could also be attributed to the declining quality in accounting education itself. A study has shown that the quality in accounting education has been declining (Watty, 2006). Watty found that 54 per cent of the accounting academics working in Australian universities in 2003 perceived the quality of accounting education had decreased, while only 23 per cent indicated that quality had improved. This is supported by researchers such as Massaro (2004) and O’Kane (2001), whose studies revealed that the quality of
education in Australian universities is being threatened, as student staff ratios have become worse over the years. For example, the ratio was about 1:12 in the early 1980s but by 2004, it was 1:26 (Massaro, 2004). The next section focuses on the students’ response to their perceptions of the context discussed earlier.

7.2 STUDENTS’ RESPONSES

Given the experience and perceptions of the Mainland Chinese students in the areas discussed in section 7.1, this study has demonstrated that the students have endeavoured to embrace the new learning environment by thinking through the challenges, adjusting their approaches and continuing to seek knowledge and understanding with an unflagging aim to graduate. As claimed by Shuell (1986, p. 429 cited in Biggs, 1993), a cognitive psychologist, ‘….it is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does’. In fact, ‘….what the student does depends on what the student perceives, interprets, and intends to do’ (Biggs, 1993, p. 73). In this case, the participants have subsequently attempted to construct knowledge for themselves instead of waiting for the transfer of knowledge as previously experienced in China. This is in accord with the constructivist view of learning that knowledge is socially constructed.

Further, how a student learns and responds to the learning environment and specific contexts are in fact affected by a set of interacting ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner identifies four distinguishing systems which correspond to Biggs’ ‘…..macro and constituent micro-systems in tertiary education’ (Biggs, 1993, p. 78), which Biggs refers to as the ‘student system’ at the micro level, ‘classroom system’ at the next level, followed by the ‘institutional system,’ which is nested in the highest level known as the ‘community system’. Basically, Biggs regards higher education as an open system with its own ecology. As he explains, ‘….in the ecology of a system, a change to any one component will, depending on the state of equilibrium already achieved, either effect change throughout and thereby create a new equilibrium and hence a new system, or the changed component will be
absorbed, the system reverting to the status quo (Biggs, 1993, p.76). The model that Biggs introduces consists of several nested micro-systems wherein ‘…each subsystem attempts a steady state of equilibrium not only internally between its own components, but also with other systems, the immediately superordinate one in particular’ (Biggs, 1993, p.76). Accordingly, at the micro level of the student system, it functions at the individual level while the classroom system comprises students, teachers, students’ perceptions of the learning context, learning processes and learning outcomes. These micro levels are further presented in greater detail in Ramsden’s model of student learning in context discussed in section 2.6 in Chapter 2. Whereas the institutional system contains mainly subsystems of the departments and faculties, lastly, at the highest level, the community system will impose its own constrains on tertiary education, ‘…which often reverberate down to the line to the classroom level’ (Biggs, 1993, p. 77); it is also at this macro level that culture fits in.

Consistent with the literature on international students’ learning, the participants in this study have difficulties starting out during their first semester of studies in Australia. However, as they progress through the semesters, it is evident that the Chinese students respond to the new experience by altering their approaches to one that is likely to foster deep learning such as independent learning. This is a natural attempt of the students in achieving the balance between themselves and the interacting ecosystem introduced earlier. As Biggs (1993, p. 76) puts it ‘….given an individual’s goals, self perceptions as to ability, the mode of teaching and assessment, the outcome, and the students’ attributions for that outcome, so the students will after exposure to a particular teaching/learning environment, find a certain approach to be viable and personally comfortable in day-to-day coping with that environment, and thus be predisposed to use deep or surface strategies for particular tasks in that context…a predisposition to this or that learning approach is the individual students’ way of achieving balance in the system as perceived by the students’.

It has been found that when students travel abroad to further their studies, they face differences which could lead to the experience of dissonance (Gan, 2009).
Dissonance is viewed as a series of stages which students experience when adjusting to a new culture (McKillop-Ostrom, 2000). Such an experience can be described as ‘….at best challenging and at worst traumatic’ (Allan, 2002, p. 75) for international students. These difficulties of transition stem from cultural and language barriers, as noted by Kember (2000) and Volet and Chalmers (1997). The study by Andrade (2006) also found international students having difficulties adapting to academic life (Ramsey et al., 1999) and social adjustment (Lewthwaite, 1996) in their first year at university. Although such difficulties represent to some extent typical transition issues for first year students, it is evident in this study that the Mainland Chinese students at all year levels were less satisfied with their educational experience. A similar observation is made by Zhao et al., (2005) on first and senior year international students. If such an experience is properly handled, the adjustment can result in a period of significant personal growth of the students, as well as developing good cross cultural communication skills (Pollock and Van Reken, 2002).

Nonetheless, as anticipated, the participants endured and persevered, as a result of their upbringing on effort, determination, emphasis on cultural values, family expectations and the fear of ‘losing face’, as discussed in Chapter 3. Despite the differences in the socio-cultural and educational backgrounds of the participants which led to different perceptions of and adaptations to the Australian education, the literature on student learning indicates that Chinese learners are generally diligent, achievement driven and have high regard for their education (Biggs and Watkins, 1996). This notion is supported by Wang (2000) in his work on international Chinese students studying in the United States. Such an observation helps reinforce the theory by Ramsden on the impact that previous educational experience and background can have on students’ perceptions, attitude and response towards their learning (see Figure 7.2). As Ramsden (2003; 1992) pointed out in his model of ‘the student context of learning’, it is the students’ perception of the educational context rather than the context itself that is the key determinant of students’ learning.
7.2.1 Dependent learning

The participants in this study acknowledge the differences between the education system and learning context in China and Australia. As indicated in the findings, some of the learning and teaching environment they experienced in China includes a didactic approach which is commonly used in the teaching and examinations are the only mode of assessment. The educational system is highly competitive, the relationship between the teachers and the students is close knit and the workload is unreasonably heavy due to the emphasis on examinations (refer to Figure 7.1). Consistent with studies on Asian learners, the participants claimed to have continued to prefer passive, teacher-directed, externally-regulated learning when they first came to Australia. More importantly, the education that these students experienced in China has led to the practice of dependent learning, where students rely heavily on their teachers in all areas of their studies (see Figure 7.3).
As emphasised by Ramsden (2003, 1991), students’ experience of their previous learning environment which encouraged a certain learning approach, has led to the development of habitual tendencies by students who continue using those approaches in their learning at university level. This finding is further supported in a more recent study by Gan (2009). Further, it is a fact that there are distinct differences between the educational system in which Chinese students find themselves when they study in Australia and the philosophical values in which they have been traditionally nurtured. As such, it is only natural to expect differences in the learning between the students’ home culture and the host culture. Independent learning which is characteristically practised in the Western culture is uncommon in China and instead the emphasis is on dependent learning, which are based on Confucian principles (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995; Marton et al., 1993). This phenomenon is also observed in the study by Holmes (2004) on Chinese students studying in New Zealand.

**Figure 7.3 Students’ learning and response**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previously in China</th>
<th>Currently in Australia</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Seek help from teachers</td>
<td>▪ Seek help from peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Relied heavily on teachers</td>
<td>▪ Self reliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Review and endless practice on questions as directed</td>
<td>▪ Preview and review lessons willingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Learning during class time</td>
<td>▪ Learning outside class time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Teachers directed learning</td>
<td>▪ Self study</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Responsibility with teachers</td>
<td>▪ Self responsible</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Moving towards

Dependent Learning

Independent Learning
7.2.2 Independent learning

Numerous studies such as Chemers et al., (2001), Stephenson and Laycock (1993) and Bryde and Milburn (1990) have suggested that Western universities generally require students to adopt self directed (Long, 1989) or autonomous learning, also frequently known as independent learning (Long, 1998). Such a form of learning is described as an individual’s ability to obtain knowledge or skills independently by methods that are determined by the learner (Chene, 1983), or as being a psychological feature of learners who are able to self direct their learning (Knowles, 1980; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Ponton, 1999). Other researchers such as Ponton et al., (2000) further define self-directed learning as an individual’s initiative in engaging with learning and seeking out resources and opportunities for learning as well as one’s persistence in learning and resourcefulness. Such a definition emphasises the psychological features of the autonomous learner and according to Long (1998), this psychological conceptualisation is important and adequate to identify self directed learning as autonomous learning or what is now commonly known as independent learning.

Studies have attempted to distinguish the characteristics of students who self-direct or self-regulate their learning from those who do not (Zimmerman, 2002, 2001, 2000, 1998; Corno, 2001; Weinstein et al., 2000; Winne, 1995). According to Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1988), independent learning is learning guided by metacognition, behaviour and motivation. In support Paris and Winograd (2003) endeavour to describe those features as awareness of thinking, use of strategies and sustained motivation. Awareness of thinking relates to the use of metacognitive knowledge in guiding the plans students make, while the use of strategies is where students would respond to and cognitively analyse alternative routes to solving a problem. As the Paris and Winograd (2003) describe, sustained motivation focuses on the skill and will of students in taking charge of their own learning. Moreover, it is found that students self-regulate their learning to a differing degree (Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons, 1988). Some learners display higher levels of self-efficacy (Pintrich, 2003) and often
demonstrate a mastery goal orientation (Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons, 1988). Basically, students who are identified as highly self-regulated learners are aware of their abilities and know how to reach their objectives, as opposed to students who are considered weak self regulated (Zimmerman, 1989).

In general, Paris and Winograd (2003) advocate the need to equip students with independent learning skills as it would help them become life-long learners. This is further emphasised by the Accounting Education Change Commission (1990) that accounting education should form a lifelong learning foundation, which comprises elements such as communication skills, intellectual skills, interpersonal skills, technical knowledge and professional orientation. Studies have indicated that there is an increasing concern by universities around the globe in ensuring that students develop qualities or generic skills which prepare them in meeting the needs of future employers (Barrie, 2007; Awayiga, Onumah and Tsamenyi., 2010). This call is for the academics and universities to emphasise learning processes that help students to construct and reconstruct knowledge and to apply the knowledge created to professional practice. Such practice surpasses the mere transfer of professional knowledge and skills in the traditional learning environment such as in China.

An individual’s approach to interaction, relationship, learning and consequences are informed by one’s culture (Babacan, 2003). Although all students experiencing a university environment for the first time will go through a period of transition, such experience is greater for international students (Guilfoyle, 2004; Burn, 1991). When students travel to a new culture, many of the practices, behaviours and conventions suitable in the home culture are no longer appropriate and hence they will need to negotiate new rules and ways of engagement and learn to apply them (Burnapp, 2006; Pincas, 2001; Ye, 2006). In this study, the participants acknowledge the differences in the learning context they now experience (i.e; freedom in learning) with what they were familiar with in China (i.e., obedience in learning). This is consistent with the work of Gan (2009), who examined the experience and adjustment of Mainland Chinese students in an Australian high school. The students overcame the initial difficulties by developing new strategies to make sense of their new learning
environment, adapting to learning strategies and maintaining a positive attitude. Once students were able to recognise the need to overcome such an academic culture shock, described by Gilbert (2000, p. 14) as ‘…a case of incongruent schemata about higher education in the students’ home country and in the host country’, they would seek to modify their learning to what is deemed more appropriate. Academic culture shock is also directly associated with the learning environment and the learning context within the academic environment. As Miller (2007) noted, higher education institutions often expect or demand from students over and above that required of them in their previous educational experience. As such, to operate and survive academically in the new educational environment, majority of the participants in this study attempted to adjust and adapt accordingly. Further, in meeting family expectations, along with the fear of ‘loosing face’ or repression if they return to China before graduation, the urgency to adjust to independent learning is even more strongly felt by the students in this study. This was emphasised in the work of Ballard (1987) and Ballard and Clanchy (1984, 1997) on the adjustment needed by Asian students in Western universities and in fact these students often perform very well in their studies (Cooper, 2004).

As the results reveal, the participants perceive their previous learning approach to be deficient compared to the learning experience in Australia, which promotes independent learning and this view is echoed by Burns (1991) and Chemers et al., (2001). In order to fit into the new academic environment, all the participants in this study made the progressive adjustment in their learning. The major response as claimed by majority of the participants is illustrated in Figure 7.3, from what is known as dependent learning to independent learning. This supports the seminal research by Paul Ramsden on the profound impact students’ perception of the task requirements, as influenced by the learning context, has on their learning.

More specifically, over the semesters, the participants have started to make good use of the freedom they have by taking up the responsibility to attempt exercises, reading text books, reviewing lecture notes and revising their work without being told or
reminded by the academics. The data also suggests that they have responded by being more organised in their studies; learning to arrange and manage their time in meeting deadlines for assignment submissions; previewing and reviewing the lessons; attempting tutorial questions and completing other assessments out of own initiative; making notes and seeking help from peers when in difficulties; setting and reaching their goals; and recognising that they are the ultimate decider of their academic success. They also seem to be coping better as they progress through the semesters. Such a response, a result of students' perceptions of the learning context, clearly exhibits the characteristics of independent as defined by the three central attributes discussed earlier. It is important to also note that students' independent manner of learning differs from individual to individual. In other words, some students display more characteristics of independent learning than others.

Generally as the findings reveal, it took at least one semester for the participants to start to embrace independent learning and as they exercised their newly acquired skills they become more confident over the following semesters. As observed, all Chinese students in the study exhibited some characteristics of independent learning in their second semester of studies, unlike that exhibited in their learning in China. The studies by Lee and Wesche (2000) and Schutz and Richards (2003) noted that adjustment for international students in a new learning environment is gradual. It was observed that the learning transitions for Asian students lasts from three to nine months (Gan, 2009; Kember, 2000; Volet and Chalmers, 1997).

Studies in international students’ learning such as those by Abeysekera (2008) and Ward and Kennedy (1996, 1992), asserted that the period of residence international students have in a host country may have a direct influence on their ability to adopt and accept the societal culture of host country. The authors argued that societal culture can influence an individual’s learning in a different manner under a different learning environment. As observed in this study, having overcome the initial obstacles and reconciled the difference, majority of the final year Chinese students have gained the ability and confidence in independent learning or self-directed study. The students
in this research have studied in Australia for at least five semesters, meaning they would have lived in Australia for more than two and a half years, and hence it is possible to have adjusted and accepted the societal culture in Australia and adapted to independent learning. This is consistent with the observation by Wong (2004) that the longer Asian international students study in Australia, the more likely they are to adapt and adopt the teaching and learning in Australia.

7.2.3 Diligence and effort
Although adjusting to the new learning environment is the responsibility of the students, diligence, effort and family expectations helped them overcome the challenges faced. It is well documented in the literature that the traditional Chinese culture emphasises diligence and effort. In this study, the Chinese students worked hard in their studies, put in considerable effort in seeking an understanding of the teaching, especially when they regard the teaching to be ineffective and the teaching staff appear disinterested in helping them. For example, the participants spend longer hours on their studies in order to make up for their inadequate English skills. The students seem to have exhibited or continued their previous habits which featured diligence and effort (Han, 2005; Chan, 1999), which has its base on the teachings of Confucius. The observation by Li et al., (2010) who found the Chinese students who had never previously studied abroad, energetic, hard working and hence performed well academically, further supports this study. Further, it was found that some students were motivated and continued to attend lectures and tutorials as a result of the high tuition fees they pay, despite their negative perceptions and experience of the teaching. They persisted in their learning, although they encountered great obstacles in understanding some of the lecturers. A similar observation was found by Abeysekera (2008) as the motivation of international students.

7.2.4 Active listening and memorising
Consistent with the work by Gan (2009) who researched Chinese students in Australian high schools, students in this study also adopt active listening in their learning to stay engaged with the lessons. It is such active listening that the
participants can wrestle with and question the lesson’s content and hence seek clarification after class. Besides employing active listening, memorising with understanding (Marton et al., 1996) is also widely used; however unlike in China, they do so out of their own initiative. For instance, as a result of poor listening and reading skills (which are often considered as vital tools in understanding and digesting the lesson), the students in this study tended to memorise accounting terms in preparation for the final exams. Students regard such learning approaches as the pathway to understanding and being successful in gaining their undergraduate degree. Such an observation is also evident in the work by Jackling (2005a) on accounting students at an Australian university, where some students relied on memory exclusively, while others used memorising as a preliminary step to understanding. As demonstrated in the study by Ferla et al., (2009) and Cooper (2004), students can utilise independent learning and a deep oriented study strategy and still equate learning relatively strongly with memorising.

7.3 The role of Australian academics and university administrators

The provision of support to international students has been extensively explored (Catterall, 2003; Chanock, 1994; Cootes, 1994; Kokkinn and Stevenson, 2003). However, there is criticism that education providers of international students are reluctant and unwilling to set aside some of the income gain from students’ fees to improve teaching quality, provide teaching support and academic support services (Avirutha et al., 2005; Marginson, 2002). According to Avirutha et al., (2005, p. 80), the income gained by education providers has been allocated to other areas which ‘….may not lead to predictable and consistent quality and high customer service geared to the needs of students, but rather those of faculty members, administrators or staff’. Marginson (2002, p.41) emphasises this, claiming that ‘….dollars generated by the education of foreign students are not applied to the same purposes as the public funding that they ostensibly replace. Rather than going to teaching and research, much of the money is ploughed back into the costs of doing business: marketing, recruitment, off-shore operations, executive salaries and travel’. Such criticism could perhaps explain some of the reasons why research such as Hellsten
(2002), East (2001) and Sherry et al., (2004) and the current study, continue to reveal international students’ dissatisfaction with the learning experience.

Numerous studies have pointed out that universities do not furnish timely pastoral and academic support to the international students, sometimes known as the vulnerable group (Ackers, 1997; Ward, 2001; Lord and Dawson, 2002) to which universities are required to provide an optimum service, as the market for international students becomes increasingly competitive (Tysome, 2003; NUS, 2006). According to Zepke et al., (2006), universities have the ability to influence students' learning via an environment that encourages the adoption of an active learner approach in the international students. As further reiterated by Campbell and Li, (2008), it is crucial that academics and universities take up the responsibility to provide international students with sufficient knowledge of academic discourses, and help them to transcend the culturally-framed borders and subjectivities.

This can be done via programs that look into all dimensions of engaging international students with the new culture. A common program is orientation, which provides skills and informs international students on the social, cultural and contextual differences in a new educational environment (Borland and Pearce, 2002) and a suggestion is that such programs also introduce the contrasting style of individualism and collectivism. Researchers such as Chalmers and Fuller (1996) have made suggestions that universities and educators should also integrate some study skills into their teaching, giving guidance to students in what they want the students to learn and the manner in which to learn. Such support is seen as critical in assisting students in developing meta-cognitive learning skills, which would lead them to becoming self-managing learners (Biggs, 2003). However, the effectiveness of such arrangements can often be hindered by the manner the programs are conducted. Where the information or guidance required by the international students, it is often found in a formal, structured learning environment. Such formality and hierarchy in approach will have implications for a student’s level of engagement with the learning experience.
The establishment of support networks such as peer mentoring or on-line peer-support (Ye, 2006) is found to be effective to connect students with their institutions (Muldoon and Goodwin (2003). This form of peer support structure has obvious cultural benefits, as it is more accessible, less formal and hence less threatening to students and Mainland Chinese students in particular, whose collectivist orientated culture has a personalised nature in forming relationships. To further enhance its value, the peer support structure should be supplemented by academics or administrators who specialise in cross cultural areas, or involve academics who have similar cultural background to the Chinese students, being Chinese themselves.

Moreover, the ICAA and CPA Australia joint accreditation guidelines (2009) and other studies (Albrecht and Sack, 2000; IFAC, 2003) have drawn attention to the importance of graduate attributes and skills in students. Researchers have also discovered that the importance of these skills would be more easily recognised by students if they are integrated into the learning context (Kennelly et al., 2010; Sin et al., 2007). In response, many tertiary institutions have begun to include such skills into their courses as a way to help ease students’ transition into the university learning environment. It is noted that many of these skills are linguistic, in both writing and critical thinking, which are aspects of the content learning process (Sin et al., 2007) and it is such skills that Chinese students are known to be lacking.

As observed in this study, the language barrier is perceived as a major hindrance to learning. Mainland Chinese students find accounting subjects that concentrate more on theories a challenge to understand compared to those that focus more on calculations. Unanimously, the Chinese students in this study acknowledge their weakness in communication skills, especially the students in their final year who continued to experience difficulties in expressing themselves, both orally and in writing. This finding certainly correlates with other research findings in Birrell (2006a) and Kennelly et al., (2010), who witnessed similar scenarios in accounting graduates. As such, particular attention should be given to the Chinese students’ communication skills by way of conducting pre-course language training as well as additional
assistance in the English language. This notion is also emphasised in the work of Li et al., (2010) who attempted to promote support for international Chinese students.

In summary, the foregoing discussion reveals that the participants perceive teaching, teacher/student relationship and English language less favourably, while assessment and workload are better received by the students. Further, the students’ inadequacy and weakness in the English language appears to contribute to the negative educational experience they have in Australian universities. This echoes the observation by Zhang and Brunton (2007) in their work conducted in New Zealand on Chinese students. As emphasised by Ramsden during the 1970s’, the notion that good teaching and a good teacher/student relationship are the most crucial aspects of a university student’s learning, continues to hold true in today’s learning environment. A similar conclusion can be found in the study by Asmar, Proude and Inge (2004) and Tan and Simpson (2008). Despite the seemingly negative experience the Mainland Chinese participants in this study have of the Australian learning context, students adapt their learning accordingly to what they deemed appropriate in the new learning environment as per their perceptions. More importantly, it is an achievement that the Chinese students are able to recognise for themselves that they need to adjust to the Western educational environment. This could be explained by their motivation and determination to graduate, their cultural background and previous educational experience.
Chapter 8

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

With the large influx of international students coming to Australia for tertiary education and in particular, students from Mainland China, it is critical that universities have an informed understanding of the expectations and perceptions of these Chinese student cohorts and recognise how they learn. To do so, it is essential to understand their educational and cultural background and the inherent impact it has on their perceptions and experience in Australia. This study thus endeavors to identify and explore the educational experience of Mainland Chinese accounting students from a student perspective.

8.1 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study concentrates on the way Mainland Chinese undergraduate accounting students, who come from an education system which strongly emphasises Confucian values, adapt and respond to the learning environment in Australian universities. This study contributes to the accounting education literature by looking at how the learning context in two Australian universities influence and is adapted to by Mainland Chinese undergraduate accounting students. The findings extend Ramsden’s seminal work on the ‘student context of learning’ in demonstrating that the learning context for Mainland Chinese students has unique features that universities and their staff should be aware of and deal with. The original Ramsden model (as depicted in Figure 2.2 in chapter 2), is extended in this study by investigating students with a unique non Western background, studying in an Australian institution.

This research also demonstrates the poignant issues that Chinese students have to face as they progress their studies through Australian universities. Further, as the focus group interviews were conducted in Mandarin, the students’ mother tongue, this
has led to unique revelations that could not have been detected if the study had been conducted in the English language.

8.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS
As noted earlier, the research questions seek to elicit information and knowledge regarding the perceptions of Mainland Chinese students on the learning context within the Australian tertiary accounting education in order to gain a better understanding of the students' learning and response to the new context. The research questions and findings are summarised below.

The first research question examined is how do Mainland Chinese students perceive the learning context in Australian universities, given their previous educational experience in Mainland China? This question is covered in section 5.2 in Chapter 5 and further discussed in section 7.1 in Chapter 7. The second research question is how do Mainland Chinese students respond to the new learning context? The findings to this question are presented in section 6.1 in Chapter 6 and analysed in section 7.2 in Chapter 7.

In summary, similar to that found in the literature and in support of the seminal work by Ramsden, this study reveals that prior educational experience and perceptions of the participants do influence a student's learning. In addition, the results show that all participants in this study acknowledged that when they first arrived in Australia, they continued their practice of relying heavily on the academic staff during their studies. However, as they begin to experience and be exposed to the learning context in Australia, they begin to move away from relying on the academic staff as they had in China, to taking up the responsibility for their own learning. This reveals that as the participants respond to their experience and perceptions of the learning context, they gradually adjusted from being a dependent learner to independent learning. This finding is consistent with the work of Nijhuis et al., (2007) who studied 522 international Business studies program students on the interplay of perceptions of the learning environment, personality and learning strategies. It also confirms the work of
other researchers that learning is influenced by students’ perceptions of the learning context (Sadlo and Richardson, 2003; Ramsden, 2003, 1997; Lizzio et al., 2002; Biggs, 1987b).

More importantly, Mainland Chinese students’ satisfaction with their educational experiences and adaptation to the learning context in Australia is an issue of particular concern in this study. The findings provide support for the concerns of researchers such as Hellsten (2002), East (2001) and Sherry et al., (2004) on international students studying in a Western learning environment. The finding of the current study has significant implications for accounting education in Australia considering the importance of international accounting major students in Australian universities. As documented in this study, students’ perceptions of the deficiencies in teaching, teacher/student relationships and the English language, require urgent attention.

The teaching is generally regarded as poor in quality, ineffective and not value-adding and the participants were disappointed with the teacher/student relationship where the desired interactions between academics and students are seen to be lacking. There is a significant mismatch in students’ expectations as the academics demonstrate a disinterest in students, unlike the experience the students have had in China. This could be contributed partly to cultural differences, students’ lack of confidence in the English language as well as an actual worsening of the quality in tertiary education. English proficiency, or lack thereof, is identified as one of the reasons why international students experience a discrepancy between expectations and experiences, leading to a so called ‘expectation violation’ and a negative impact on their attitudes on teaching and learning (Li et al., 2002, p. 1).

On the contrary, assessment is well received by the participants. They are most enthusiastic about the new and different modes of assessment in Australia, as they regard the development of skills through the different types of assessments essential for their future. Similarly, workload is also perceived positively by the participants, as it
is said to be more manageable, reasonable and enjoyable compared to what they had previously experienced in China. However, due to the students’ weakness and inadequacy in the English language, they tend to increase the amount of time spent in their studies. As evident in the findings, it appears that the greatest adjustment and challenge students encounter in the Australian educational environment is the use of the English language. As such, to mitigate their weakness in the language, they spend a greater amount of time in their studies. As observed in this study, students’ weakness in the English language also appears to be part of the reasons they have such a negative educational experience in Australian universities, which is consistent with that found in the work by Zhang and Brunton (2007). Despite the problems with English language and the overall less satisfying learning experience, the Chinese students indicated that they nevertheless perform well academically. This is attributed to their culture that emphasises effort, determination, motivation and family expectations.

In contrast to Nijhuis et al., (2007) and Trigwell et al., (1996) who suggested that positive perceptions of the learning environment would allow for independence in learning, this study found that when independent learning is perceived as expected or necessary, the participants would move towards adopting an independent approach, despite the negative perceptions they have on the learning context. This is the case especially when students feel that it is the only way for them to survive academically. Therefore, not withstanding the seemingly less than satisfactory educational experience these students have in the Australian educational environment, they are flexible enough to change their ways in learning to what they see as more appropriate in Australia. Students’ perceptions that independent learning is expected of them is in line with the contexts in the Australian tertiary environment, which is generally designed for students to assume a more significant level of responsibility and commitment in regulating their own learning than is the case in China.

Most final year students have adjusted to independent learning, especially as they recognise the benefits it brings, such as the development of useful skills that will help
them in their future careers. This is consistent with the views of Senyshyn et al., (2000). The learning experience and exposure to the Australian educational context and practices has led the students in this study to reflect on their assumptions and make the necessary adjustments. Further, previous educational experience in China and the Chinese cultural values which focus on learning through repetition, attentive listening, memorisation, effort, determination and the obligation to uphold family honor and meeting expectations, are all part of the reasons which contribute to the willingness of the participants in adjusting and adapting to the learning context in Australia. Although the primary responsibility of adaptation in a new learning environment belongs to the students, academics and universities should help bridge the gap. For example, whilst teaching, the academics can speak more slowly, clearly and use examples that all students can understand. International student/peer support groups with the aid of specialist staff will also enhance the learning experience for international students.

In fact, universities with international students have a particular obligation to ensure that these students are properly supported pastorally and are prepared for the academic rigor of their chosen courses (Gan, 2009). This can be achieved by explicitly explaining the demands and expectations to the students and hence help the students to become accustomed to the Western way of teaching and learning. More precisely, educators in Australian universities should endeavor to improve Chinese students' understanding of the Australian academic culture and its profound emphasis on independent learning and individual responsibility. Further, university and academic staff must more proactively engage with international students, allocating more time outside class and create the opportunity to interact with the students in a more meaningful and less formal way, as a gesture of welcoming these students. Examples include organizing an international day, cultural celebration or day trips to places of interests. International students should be regarded and highly valued by universities as vital contributors to international exchange and diplomacy (Lee, 2010). As Lee explains, such recognition could help cultivate a more positive education
experience for the international students, rather than simply expecting these students to ‘adapt’ and assimilate to the culture and expectations of the university.

This notion is strongly supported by Christie et al., (2008) who view the need for universities to adapt to the changing needs of their international students. An example of the kind of assistance universities could offer to Chinese students, as suggested and revealed in the focus group discussions, is the provision of Mandarin speaking teachers in helping students cope with their studies outside teaching hours. It is also imperative that accounting academics take time to evaluate, adjust and reflect on their own teaching practices, in an attempt to improve the quality of the education provided to international students. Equally important, universities need to take on a greater role in educating their teaching staff on the cultures of its student cohort, as cultural ignorance will have considerable implications on both the teaching and learning. Further, in the pursuit for excellence in research and reputation, universities must ensure that good teaching is not impacted on with the zeal to expand research output.

8.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As with any study of this nature, there are a number of limitations. Firstly, this study is cross-sectional, giving only a snap shot view of students’ perceptions and the influence it has on their learning. A longitudinal study could certainly assist to confirm the findings of the study.

Secondly, the sample of 26 students is taken from only two universities, thereby limiting the generalisability of results. However, given that there are considerable similarities between the accounting undergraduate degree program offered by the two Australian universities used in this study (and all accounting degree programs for that matter), there are grounds for suggesting the results are generalisable.

Thirdly, there is a possibility of the loss of meaning in translation of focus group data from Mandarin to English. However, the translation by the researcher was checked for accuracy and consistency by a second translator, an independent party, who
translated a sample of the transcripts back into the Mandarin language. Further, as the focus group discussions with the Chinese students were conducted in their mother tongue, the Mandarin language, this increases the reliability and quality of the data provided by the students.

8.4 FUTURE RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES
The concept of the learning context and its impact on learning is a complex one, and attention to this issue is needed in the accounting literature, to inform accounting educators on ways to improve the quality of learning of their students from the students’ perspective and hence offers a good research opportunity. Further, according to the Australian immigration selection policy in recent years, preference for permanent residency status is given to overseas students with an accounting degree. As such, there is a possibility that the intention of some students seeking tertiary education in Australia is to gain permanent residency status via an accounting degree. If that is the case, the students’ learning attitude and behaviour could be different from what was assumed of them, namely to acquire knowledge and perform well academically in order to be more employable in the future, which is perhaps an area for future research.

Another area for future research is the investigation of learning outcomes along with students’ perceptions of the learning context, in order to comprehend the effects of the change in students’ learning as they progress through their accounting studies. The findings in this study provide a good base on which to build a better understanding of the performance of accounting students in response to their perceptions of the learning context.

8.5 IN CONCLUSION
As presented in this thesis, and as emphasised by numerous researchers such as Ramsden (2003), Sadlo and Richardson (2003), Nijhuis et al., (2007) and Prosser (2000), student learning is strongly affected by their own perceptions and experience of the learning context, which ultimately influences their response towards the
educational environment. As such, there are escalating demands on accounting educators and universities to shoulder the responsibility in continuously improving and meeting the demands and expectations of students. Finally, this study demonstrates that researchers in accounting education should continue to investigate further the issues surrounding student learning, in order to keep pace with the ever changing generation of students, the business world and society in general.


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Appendix 1

Student Survey

How to complete this survey:
Please answer each question by ticking the relevant box that corresponds to your answer(s) (in each case, please tick only one box) or by writing your answer in the spaces provided. When you have completed this questionnaire, please return it to the researcher before the commencement of the focus group discussion.

Background information

1. Student number: ______________________
2. Year of study: First year Second year Final year
3. Gender: Female Male
4. Age: (in years as of your last birthday)__________________
5. Place of Birth: _________________________
6. Mother’s place of birth: ______________________
7. Father’s place of birth: ______________________
8a. Number of siblings: None 1 to 2
3 to 4 4 above
8b. Were you born under One Child Policy? Yes No
9. First language: English Mandarin Cantonese
   Other please specify ______________________
10. **On a scale of say 1 to 10, (1 being lowest and 10 being highest), how good are you in your English skill?**

   Written English: ________   Reading English: ________
   Spoken English: ________
   Listening English: ________

11. **How often do you attend lecture?**

    None   (please specify reasons)__________________________
    1 to 3 times   4 to 6 times   7 to 9 times
    10 to 11 times   All   Not Applicable

12. **How often do you attend tutorial?**

    None   (please specify reasons)__________________________
    1 to 3 times   4 to 6 times   7 to 9 times
    10 to 11 times   All   Not Applicable

13. **How regularly do you contact a lecturer/tutor for help in your studies in a semester?**

    Not at all   (please specify reasons)__________________________
    1 to 3 times   4 to 6 times   7 to 9 times
    10 to 12 times   More than 12 times   Not Applicable

14. **In general, what level of success do you expect to achieve in your studies this semester?**

    High Distinction   Distinction   Credit   Pass
    Fail   Don’t know   Not Applicable
Appendix 2

Focus Group Schedule

Introduction

Explain the aim of the focus group discussion is to examine the differences in the learning in China (based on past educational experience and cultural background) as compared to those adopted in Australia. Indicate the concentration is on the perceived learning context that may affect or influence their learning strategies.

(Note: All the questions below will not necessarily be covered, depending on the flow of the discussion).

Teaching

1. Tell me about your experience of the teaching in China. (method, pace, enthusiasm, attitude, praise, etc.)
2. With the teaching that you’ve mentioned, does it affect your learning? If yes, how? If no, why not?
3. Tell me about your experience of the teaching now in Australia.
4. With that teaching, does it affect your learning? If yes, how? If no, why not?
5. Do you feel any change in the way you are learning now compared to when you were in China? Explain.
Assessment

1. Tell me about the methods (freedom in learning, clear goals, standard, relevance, exam based etc) you were assessed on your learning in China. Give examples.
2. With that type of assessment, how did you learn?
3. What about the methods you are assessed on your learning in Australia. Give examples.
4. How are you learning with the types of assessment here?

Teacher/student relationship

1. How friendly or helpful are the teachers in China? Give examples.
2. Tell me about the teacher-student relationship in China (special effort to accommodate students’ need, frequency of contact, quality, availability- class size etc). Give examples.
3. How does that affect your learning? Explain with examples.
5. Tell me about the teacher-student relationship in Australia. Give examples.
6. How does that affect your learning? Explain with examples.

Workload

1. Tell me about the amount of workload (number of classes, preparation needed, amount of self-study time etc) you experienced in China. Give examples.
3. Tell me about the amount of workload you experience here at RMIT/Deakin. Give examples.
English language

1. On the scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest), what level of written, spoken, reading and listening English skills do you think is needed in accounting undergraduate program? Why?

2. With your current level of English skills, how do you learning? Explain.

Closing Questions

1. What is the first and most important factor that influences your learning?
   - teaching
   - assessment
   - teacher/ student relationship
   - workload
   - English language
   - Any others which we have not covered? Explain.

2. Is there any difference in the way you are learning in Australia compared to previously in China? Explain.