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Direct entry students in UK higher education: lived learning experiences and a sense of belonging amidst crisis environments

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Abstract

***Research Question*:** How do direct entry accounting students perceive their experiences during a period of unprecedented disruption to the higher education environment caused by the pandemic?
***Motivation*:** With the internationalisation of higher education and the fact that UK Universities have become a major option for studying abroad, Chinese students represent one of the largest components of non-EU students in the UK. The present study responds to Heng's (2018) calls for more research on the contextual understanding of Chinese students' experiences. To the best of authors' knowledge this is the first research in the UK that offers empirical evidence of Chinese direct (advanced) entry students' perceptions of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning.
***Idea*:** The rapid shift to distance or blended learning resulting after COVID-19 created an unforeseen learning crisis and a significant disruptive impact on how students have developed their learning interactions with the physical university environment, teachers, and peers.
***Data*:** We conduct a qualitative open-ended questionnaire with 41 undergraduate Chinese students who directly enrolled into the final year of an accounting programme in the UK.
***Tools*:** This study is influenced by the sociocultural and cultural adaptation theories.
***Findings*:** This study offers unique insights on learning environment, teacher's role, sense of belonging, and cultural adaptation and socialisation. The findings have applicability beyond the UK context.
***Contribution*:** We contribute to scarce academic literature on the experiences of direct entry students and highlight the implications for successful educational transition as well as the role of teachers in cultural adaption.

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1. Introduction

With the internationalisation of higher education and the fact that UK Universities have become a major option for studying abroad, Chinese students represent one of the largest components of non-EU students in the UK. The number of students in the UK from China has increased from 4,000 in 1998/99 (Iannelli & Huang, 2014) to 143,820 in 2020/21, with a notable rise of over 50% in the five-year period 2016/17 to 2020/21 (HESA, 2022). Due to China's intense domestic competition for education and the strive to acquire global competence (Zhai & Cao, 2022), Chinese learners are highly motivated to pursue a higher education qualification in a foreign country in order to gain the economic and social graduate status (Sánchez *et al.*, 2006; Ekanayake & Jackling, 2014), and to open future migration opportunities and career prospects (Zhai *et al.*, 2019). In the year ending September 2019, there were 119,697 sponsored study (Tier 4) UK visas granted to Chinese nationals, a 21% increase of 20,893 more than in 2018 (ONS, 2019). In the year ending June 2022, Chinese students were the second most common nationality for sponsored study visas in the UK (ONS, 2022).

International students from China, as an important population in universities, represent a significant source of revenue, and their presence continues to grow in higher education programmes worldwide. "The ability to understand international students' current and predicted future demands is key not only for universities but also for policymakers" in supporting higher education system to cope with the increasing demand on the higher education provision internationally (Iannelli & Huang, 2014, p. 819). Although prior studies have examined different aspects of Chinese students' learning (Zou & Yu, 2019), there is little research on the experiences of a growing type of Chinese students who enrol directly from China into the final years of an undergraduate programme (Reilly & Warren, 2019). Students who enter their degree in the final year, from another institution, are generally known as 'direct entry' students. This term 'direct entry', sometimes referred to as DE, might be compared with the term 'transfer' student in a similar context, for example, in USA, Canada, Nigeria among other countries, where a student seeks admission into a higher education institution using a partial completion of a specific degree program at a college or another institution. To some extent, direct entry international student population can also be compared with home students transferring from colleges or other universities into the final year of study (Quinn-Nilas *et al.*, 2022).

In the UK, the terms 'advanced entry' or 'direct entry' are used to describe a unique subgroup of any international students who arrive to complete the final part of their undergraduate programme/degree from a foreign university. These students enter the 2nd or 3rd year in the UK with credit given for prior learning. Their prior student experience differs significantly from other international students because their initial learning is often in a different language and teaching and assessments may differ due to cultural norms. In addition, their experience in UK higher education is atypical due to short transition periods and challenges of integrating into the established student cohort. This is further exacerbated when considering the challenges international students face when studying abroad.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2021) data shows that the number of advanced entry (direct entry) Chinese students in the UK has experienced an ongoing growth, with 2,800 enrolled students in 2017/18 and 3,045 in 2019/20, with Accounting and Finance subject areas being recorded among the top four for advanced entry students. Recruiting Chinese students directly to the final year of a degree programme requires a deeper understanding of their needs (O'Dea, 2023; Warren *et al.*, 2019; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Race & Pickford, 2007). Coming from a different educational system, Chinese students may face learning difficulties such as those associated with differences in classroom activities, language of instruction, critical thinking, knowledge application, and self-study skills. The increasing intake of direct entry Chinese students has led to a variety of support initiatives implemented by business schools, departments, and individual academics, to overcome student culture shock (Wilson, 2009), enhance their induction process (Wray, 2013), assist with transition and adjustment to the new environment (Coverdale-Jones & Rastall, 2009), and improve conditions that support student success (Reilly & Warren, 2019).

Learning experiences of 'direct entry' or 'advanced entry' international students add further complexity. Students who enter directly into the final year of an undergraduate degree are arguably different from Chinese Masters students who start a study programme as a whole cohort. Direct-entry international students who join an established cohort in the final year of study are likely to face significant social and academic adjustment challenges. *First*, direct-entry students may experience some form of isolation from their peers due to lack of friendships. By the time they enter the programme, most of their peers will have formed established friendships and connections with each other, leaving little room for new people to join or time to adapt and build relationships, which can be problematic in the final year of study (Andrade, 2006). *Second*, direct-entry students may be affected by differences between the undergraduate curriculum in their home country and that in the host country. Certain concepts may be repeated or linked throughout subjects in a programme/degree, and lecturers may not explain them repeatedly assuming that students are familiar with these concepts. Direct entry students may not have prior knowledge of these concepts and may suffer academically, which poses difficulties

in classroom discussions (O'Connell & Resuli, 2020). It is therefore important not only to understand who these students are and what they need, but also to know how the university can help to support them and improve their academic success. However, the aforementioned challenges that Chinese direct entry students may encounter during their final year of study in an unfamiliar learning environment may have been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic environment and student learning. As called by Sangster *et al.* (2020) and Jiang *et al.* (2021), further research is needed to explore the student experiences during COVID-19 as one of the many issues related to accounting education.

The above-stated arguments specify the rationale of the paper. By means of qualitative open-ended questionnaires with 41 undergraduate Chinese students who directly enrolled into the final year of an accounting and finance programme in the UK, the present study explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning experiences. We find unique insights into students' perceptions on learning environment, teacher's role, sense of belonging, and cultural adaptation and socialisation. Qualitative comments generate a rich understanding of their experiences during a period of unprecedented disruption to the higher education environment caused by the pandemic. We respond to Heng's (2018) calls for more research on the contextual understanding of Chinese students' experiences. To the best of authors' knowledge this is the first research in the UK that offers empirical evidence of Chinese direct (advanced) entry students' perceptions of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning.

This study is influenced by the sociocultural and cultural adaptation theories. The sociocultural theory highlights the importance of past and present social and cultural factors (Eisenhart, 2001; Heng, 2018), and contends that social interactions between individuals transform learning (Vygotsky, 1978), where community development is central to building of support network in educational setting (Alfred, 2009). The cultural adaptation theory suggests that individuals adapt to an unfamiliar culture by adjusting their initial cultural norms and habits through communicative interaction with the host environment (Kim, 2012). Accordingly, the current study looks at learning experiences of direct entry students to explore how their learning and new knowledge is constructed and shaped by their social interactions and intercultural adjustments. The COVID-19 pandemic has implications for the cultural integration of international students as their mobility is affected (Al-Oraibi *et al.*, 2022). We integrate a conceptual framework, contending that social interaction and cultural adaptation are likely to be affected by the crisis which, in turn, influences the learning and acquired knowledge. We contribute to the accounting education literature by providing some insights on the learning experiences, perspectives, and challenges of Chinese direct entry students in the UK enrolled in accounting and finance programmes, when faced with a crisis learning environment such as COVID-19. This research can be of interest to academics and researchers, particularly in

countries where higher education institutions accept Chinese or other international direct entry students into the final years of study, as the conceptualisation from this research can inform further research design or provide guidelines to follow.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant education literature and presents a conceptual framework. Section 3 outlines the research design and methodology, followed by the study findings in section 4. Finally, section 5 provides conclusions, contributions, limitations, and identifies directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptual framework

The sociocultural framework emphasises the importance of previous and current contexts for participants' learning, including psychological, social, and cultural factors (Heng, 2018; Eisenhart, 2001). This is aligned with constructivist approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and helps to gain a better understanding of student lived experiences during a particular situation. This approach assumes that humans and their beliefs are shaped by their social and cultural contexts, and humans' perceptions might change within different contexts (Eshun & Boburka, 2017). Transitions, based on individual's broad conceptualisation, can be viewed in the form of either developmental changes or physical moves between educational contexts and can be interpreted using this sociocultural framework (Crafter & Maunder, 2012). Social interactions between individuals transpire learning via two stages of social interaction and independent internalisation of social behaviours or cognitive development (Leonard, 2002). Moving from another educational system means that students must adapt and build upon what they already know (Vaynshtok, 2002). Development of community is a central precept of sociocultural approach of support networks with locally born peers in an educational setting (Alfred, 2009). The previous learning experience is crucial to learning in this new environment; however, building upon prior learning is a challenge on its own. These students are not socialised in the context of this new environment. According to Chinese students, a good teacher gives students clear and a good student is one who acquires knowledge by receiving (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997).

For educational purposes international students settle into a new cultural setting after leaving the familiar environment of their domestic culture, which necessitates the creation of a relatively stable operational bond with the host environment (Kim, 2017). This process is known as cross-cultural adaptation, where individuals adjust their initial cultural norms in the new setting. According to cultural adaptation theory, individuals undertake new cultural habits as acculturation and forgo some of their original habits as deculturation through communicative involvement with the host environment (Kim, 2012). Students gain new knowledge and reshape their

identity through active participation in situations, personal reflections, and social interactions with peers and teachers. The impact of COVID-19 on international students can be intensified by language barriers and cross-cultural adjustments. Online learning as a result of COVID-19 enhanced international students' reliance on technology which could slow their cross-cultural adaptation. Beyond academic attainment, COVID-19 has implications for cultural immersion of international students due to constrained mobility (Al-Oraibi *et al.*, 2022), limiting the foreign exposure, socialising, and access to international job market (Schleicher, 2020).

Based on Bobe and Cooper (2020) and Tharapos *et al.* (2022), the study proposes the following conceptual framework (Figure 1). We explore the learning experiences of direct entry Chinese students, when faced with a crisis learning environment, COVID-19. Prior knowledge has long been considered the most important factor influencing students' learning and ability to learn (Dong *et al.*, 2020). Students use their previous knowledge, which is different for each student, to develop new knowledge by relating the new information to their prior understanding. This process of learning and acquiring new knowledge is influenced by their social interaction, as well as by their cultural integration into the new learning environment in the form of cultural exchange and adaptation of practices and beliefs. Social interaction plays a very important role in the development of international students' English language skills by communicating with peers in different social contexts. This is especially important for direct entry students. We argue that crisis influences social interaction and cultural adaptation, which affects the development of learning in the context of previous and new learning experiences.

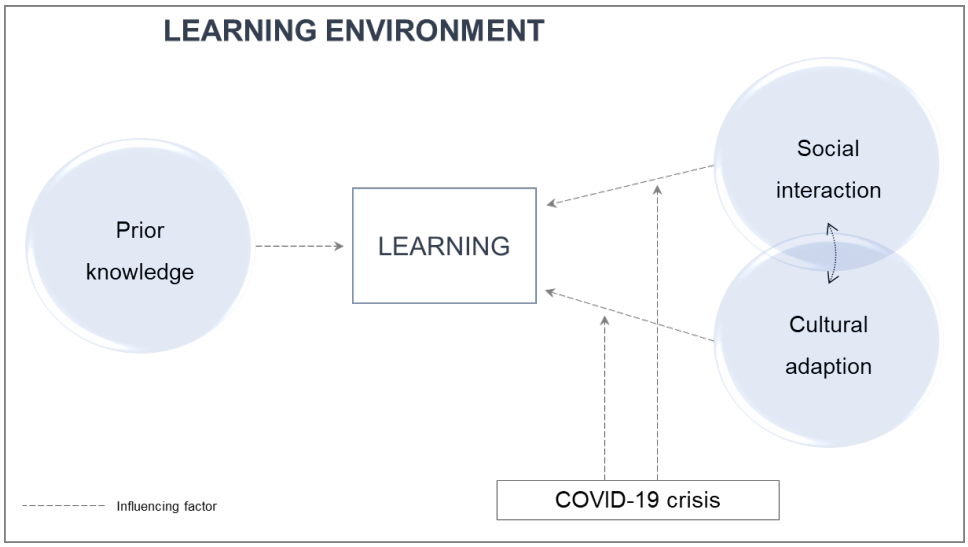

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

2.2 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning experience

The COVID-19 pandemic, with more than 778 million confirmed cases and 7.1 million reported deaths globally at the time of writing (World Health Organization, 2025), has had an unprecedented impact on almost every sector globally (Elaoud & Jarboui, 2022; Schaltegger, 2021). Universities around the world were severely affected with a lasting impact on teaching, learning, and educational systems. Universities faced large-scale disruptions due to the shift to online or blended education, leading to reconceptualising and re-imagining educational systems (Eringfeld, 2021). As a result, the pandemic created an unforeseen crisis for learning environment (Tharapos *et al.*, 2022). The rapid shift to distance learning had a significant impact and disrupted the way students interacted and developed their learning with the physical university environment, teachers, and peers (Lim and Tanaya, 2021). According to the Center for China and Globalization, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted Chinese students seeking to study abroad, but there are no fundamental changes in the student demand on studying in the UK (CCG, 2021).

COVID-19 put considerable pressure on international higher education across the globe by reducing the international student mobility and testing the ability of higher education systems to adapt to high demands of online learning. The pandemic made it impossible to continue what academics typically did with students and forced a fundamental question of what lecturers and students should do in the new learning environment (Goedegebuure & Meek, 2021; Fogarty, 2020). The inevitable educational change impacted student learning experience (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021), informal interaction, accessibility and affordability of online learning, psychological well-being of students (Holzer *et al.*, 2021), and application of active-learning and student engagement (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). Blondeel *et al.* (2021) evidence that students' course satisfaction and performance were unaffected by the switch to online education. Iglesias-Pradas *et al.* (2021) find that students achieve better results under emergency remote teaching. However, research shows increased stress, anxiety due to isolation and social distancing as well as difficulty concentrating due to online learning (Lemay *et al.*, 2021). Our research contributes to the literature on the impact of COVID-19 (e.g. Lima *et al.*, 2025; Cam and Ballantine, 2023; Blondeel *et al.*, 2021; Peters *et al.*, 2020; Mok *et al.*, 2021), and explores the learning experiences of Chinese direct entry students during COVID-19 in the UK context.

2.3 Learning challenges of Chinese students

The prior literature has explored learning experiences and different challenges of Chinese students in higher education programmes taught in English-speaking countries (Cho *et al.*, 2008; Sugahara *et al.*, 2008; Wang *et al.*, 2012; Wang, 2012;

Frambach *et al.*, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Bordia *et al.*, 2019; Zou and Yu, 2019) and shows that learning experiences of Chinese students might differ from the rest of cohort. Chinese students often face the challenge of adapting to a very different education system and learning environment (Xiao & Dyson, 1999; Gill, 2007; Zou & Yu, 2019), leading to a range of challenges such as those connected with classroom group activities and participation (Wang *et al.*, 2012), cross-cultural differences (Bartram, 2008; Frambach *et al.*, 2014), or language barriers (Xu, 2002; Simpson, 2017), and critical thinking, creativity, self-directed learning (Sugahara *et al.*, 2008; Sun & Richardson, 2012; Wu, 2015).

Some studies have indicated that Chinese students experience difficulties with participative approaches and group activities used in the classroom, that are considered as a means of encouraging students to learn from each other's ideas and experience in Western education systems (Elliott & Reynolds, 2014; De Vita, 2002; Livingstone & Lynch, 2002; Currie, 2007; Ledwith & Seymour, 2001; Firang, 2020). Previous literature shows that Chinese students are not familiar with critical thinking, self-directed learning (Holmes, 2004; Wu, 2015) or deep approach to learning and analysis (Sun & Richardson, 2012; Ramachandra & Wells, 2021) and often observe greater difficulty in essay writing (Durkin, 2011; Wu, 2015).

Prior research has shown that communication styles differ across cultural contexts particularly in Eastern and Western cultures (Nguyen *et al.*, 2009; Hu & Fan, 2011; Smith, 2011; Brew *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2012; Frambach *et al.*, 2014). Interactive classroom activities and expectations of student learning in Western student-centered environments might create unintended difficulties in classroom discussions (Wang *et al.*, 2012) due to cultural factors, organisational decisions, or individual characteristics such as students' personalities, language of instruction, lecturers' behaviour, and the assessment system (Frambach *et al.,* 2014. Chinese students often deal with language barriers which may hinder their academic adjustment (Wu, 2015) or academic performance international students (Martirosyan *et al.*, 2015). However, communication difficulties are not always recognised by lecturers as potentially cultural rather merely language problems (Simpson, 2017).

Although there is a rise in awareness of the importance of internationalising the curriculum in the higher education sector (El-Tawy & Abdel-Kader, 2022; Yemini & Sagie, 2015; Tian & Lowe, 2009), Cheng *et al.* (2018) note that real-life challenges of integration of Chinese students somewhat raise a question of how academics apply internationalising curricula. A lack of international experience, lack of knowledge, and stereotyping can be the key barriers on curriculum internationalisation (Sawir, 2011), generating tensions between academics and students (Cheng *et al.*, 2018). Universities should "not only to grow international student enrolment but also balance it with corresponding support services"

(Choudaha, 2017, 831) as well as adapt teaching practices in response to students' diversity (Wu, 2015) and understand their learning expectations (Bordia *et al.,* 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection and participants

To investigate the learning experiences during COVID-19, the study collects qualitative comments from a group of Chinese Direct Entry to the final year Students (CDES) at a UK university. Using a non-probability purposeful sampling strategy, this study focused on exploring views and perceptions rather than generalisations (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), by inviting all CDES on accounting and finance courses during 2020 and 2021. Comments were received from a total of 41 students (cohort population 113 students, response rate ~36%). The participant names were replaced with numbers to preserve anonymity, from CDES 1 to CDES 41. All participants studied at UG level 6 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) (Appendix A). The sample (N=41) consists of 17 (41%) males and 24 (59%) females. The participants enrolled into their full-time degree in the final year from an institution in China, but, due to COVID-19 lockdowns, was moved to be taught online. The participants were in the UK, with online classes being the predominant part of their studies.

The data were collected through a questionnaire advertised via workshops. Students were asked to reflect on a set of questions and email their answers to the teacher, resulting in voluntary self-recruited non-incentivised responses. The ethical approval was gained for the analysis of this data. An open-ended questionnaire allowed the respondents to express themselves freely on a set of qualitative questions in writing (Oppenheim, 1966), in as much detail as they like in their own words. Interviews were considered as impractical due to potential language/speaking issues (Kingston and Forland, 2008). Appendix B presents the questions used to explore the participants views of the impact of COVID-19 on their learning experiences. The collected data resulted in 32 pages of 12,422 words.

3.2 Data analysis

The qualitative data was first examined and anonymised by the lead researcher. The analysis included two stages: 1) thematic analysis; 2) word cloud analysis.

In stage one, the textual data were analysed independently by nine academics, including three co-authors as well as six researchers-volunteers who were recruited at a UK university for this research task, resulting in a mixed group of academics with and without experience of dealing with CDES. A blind manual thematic

analysis (King, 2004) was conducted independently by nine researchers, allowing to reduce potential researcher bias and enhance credibility (Côté & Turgeon, 2005). *First*, the process involved each member of the research team reading and working individually through the entire data set, reviewing the participants' qualitative answers, identifying emerging patterns, and generating a list of basic themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Basic themes were generated inductively without an attempt to fit into a pre-existing frame (Boyatzis, 1998; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). *Second*, the co-authors analysed the collated themes from all researchers, identifying similarities and differences, and developed a uniform list of basic themes. *Third*, these themes were then grouped into higher order themes, reducing basic themes to a final of three global themes. To further enhance the credibility, several meetings were held to review and discuss the themes (Nowell *et al.*, 2017), with no issues reported. Appendix C shows a summary of the analysis.

In stage two, following the methodological approach by Brooks and Schopohl (2018), textual data analysis based on an overall frequency of keywords was performed using NVivo 12 Pro software in order to understand the relative importance of the words used. The analysis included the most common words assigned by the participants in the dataset (including 'exact match', 'stemmed words', and 'synonyms'). To avoid separate counts being formed, the researchers converted equivalent words, plurals into their single forms, adjectives into nouns for words with the same meaning (e.g. 'teachers' becomes 'teacher'). By design of the search algorithm, each word is counted separately so that an answer composed of two words is counted by each word (e.g. the answer 'dedicated mentor' would be counted under 'dedicated' and 'mentor'). A table of the top 50 most frequently used words is included in Appendix D, with some results integrated into the findings section. These words correspond with the themes identified in stage one via a manual thematic analysis.

The findings from the two stages of analysis are presented in the findings and discussion section. Some quotes are integrated into the narrative to engage the reader with the participants experiences as naturally as possible (Baxter & Chua, 1998).

4. Findings and discussion

The key three themes emerge from the analysis of the learning experiences (Figure 2): 1) learning environment (4.1), 2) role of teachers (4.2), 3) cultural adaptation and socialisation (4.3). Building on our theoretical framework, we examine Chinese direct entry students learning experiences and challenges of studying in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore students' perceptions of what would be different in their learning experience and what they had hoped to experience in a traditional UK learning environment, considering, ultimately, how COVID-19

affected their learning environment. Most students were self-reflective when sharing their perceptions of the problems associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

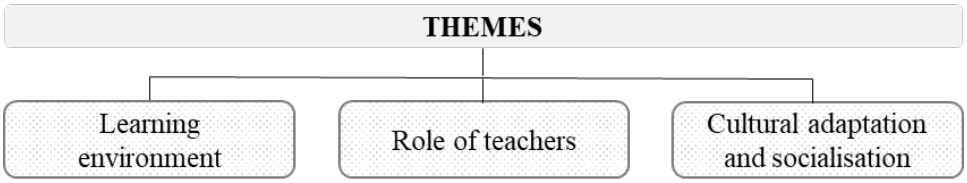

Figure 2. Key themes

4.1 Learning environment: expectations vs reality

The direct entry students were asked to describe their perceptions of the impact that COVID-19 had on their studies. Few students commented that the impact was relatively minor as the classes still had similar material but were now offered online. Many of the participants however described this change as a significant challenge. Figure 3 demonstrates the most commonly words used to explain the learning experiences during COVID-19, with a higher focus placed on how the classes are organised, the learning atmosphere, and communication during the pandemic. In what follows we discuss the results.

Figure 3. Word cloud: learning during COVID-19

Ultimately, the key sociocultural environment expected by the direct entry students was not as anticipated. The lack of social interaction and cultural context was most notable in the learning environment. This impacted both their cross-cultural

adaptation and their sociocultural experiences. The analysis reveals that the highest relative importance is placed on words 'face', 'online', 'class', and 'learning', with a weighted value of 3.97%, 3.35%, 3.17%, and 2.36% respectively (see Appendix D with the top 50 most commonly words used by the participants, weighted by the number of occurrences). In line with Wang and Reeves (2007) and Ganesh *et al.* (2015), the majority of the respondents in our study were in favour of face-to-face teaching based on their previous learning experiences. They highlighted that "*face to face class has an atmosphere of study*" [CDES35], whereas online classes "*make feel less sense of belonging*" [CDES20]. This challenge often felt by Chinese students when studying abroad was amplified for these students due to the pandemic and inability to provide this learning. We expand on previous research by providing insights on the benefits of face-to-face learning that students have pointed out, as illustrated in the following examples:

> *"Teachers are likely focus more on students" [CDES21]*
> *"Face-to-face courses will make everyone's class experience better" [CDES24]*
> *"F2F class will make me realize I'm in the learning life" [CDES37]*
> *"Face-to-face learning can better absorb knowledge" [CDES38]*

Although the respondents largely supported the view that with COVID-19 online classes "*the learning atmosphere declined*" [CDES 36], the main positives associated with the move to online learning were related to accessibility (e.g., online materials) and better educational system overseas (Chao *et al.*, 2017). This supports evidence from prior literature (Soffer & Nachmias, 2018) that frequent access to recorded lessons enhances student engagement and satisfaction with online learning. Tasso *et al.* (2021) analysis of college students evidence their vulnerability of being neglected as they have recently entered a relatively independent learning environment. Direct entry students existing familiarisation with the university's learning environment, somehow prepare them for uncertainties and changes in the traditional learning environment. It is also to note that for Chinese students the ability to play back recordings may have helped to reduce perceived difficulties with language noted below. Few respondents who were somewhat inclined towards online study primarily highlighted the availability of recorded lectures and screen notes. Flexibility was highlighted as a key advantage, with the word 'time' being among the top five most used by students:

> *"Actually, I felt more freedom since the online lesson is recorded, and I can watch whenever I want, this gives me more time to organise myself, I can be free to arrange my study." [CDES11]*

Many students blamed their internet connectivity for the issues that they experienced as they struggled to follow the teacher at the same time: "When the network signal is not good, the class experience will seriously decline" [CDES36]. We elaborate the findings of Elfirdoussi *et al.* (2020) that technical challenges prevent students from

transitioning effectively to online learning, and teachers can be provided with technical support and training to integrate such remote learning smoothly. Additionally, COVID-19 has put more emphasis on IT skills. Many academics needed to upskill themselves to be ready to teach online. However, similar challenges were noted for students with a lack of advanced computer skills or knowledge of applications.

> *"Personally, it is a new learning style in which I need to concentrate more on slides online. [...] to understand how to use technological application to learn by myself" [CDES3]*

Another issue noted by the respondents was linked to the perceived faster speed of delivering the course online. On some occasions the teachers spoke too quickly and changed screens fast [CDES34], so it was not always possible to understand what was being said. However, some students noted that it was not necessarily the speed of classes, but the fact that it was much easier to be "distracted and unable to keep up with the pace of the teacher" [CDES12]. Li and Che (2022) support this by reporting the lack of suitable learning environment during COVID-19, leads to declining academic performance.

COVID-19 with a shift towards remote teaching arrangements also drew attention to well-being challenges related to new approaches to teaching and learning (WEF, 2020). According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021, 5), in "summer 2021, adults aged 16 to 29 years were most likely to experience some form of depression (26%)" than older adults. Even students with good mental health conditions may experience challenges of integrating into a new learning environment. International students, living away from home, typically experience stress and isolation during the integration process. The higher education environment during the COVID-19 lockdowns was emotionally and psychologically challenging for many students, especially international direct entry students:

> *"In this quite short period, lots of students were turning to a negative way, they faced pressures, and got lost, which is regrettable. Therefore, I believe the active thinking could lead one to get further" [CDES4]*

Their integration into a study life was severely affected, extending the period of loneliness and isolation. Spending more time than usual on the computer could cause fatigue and anxiety. The decreased motivation was often associated with the limitations of online learning, such as a lack of a quiet place to study and bad internet connection (Meeter *et al.*, 2020). Many participants commented about a decreased motivation and self-discipline due "*the lack of studying atmosphere*" [CDES40], as illustrated below:

> *"Due to the losing of normal daily, it is hard to keep a healthy time routine, it influences both my life and studying process" [CDES4]*

"If you lack self-control ability, you will not gain much" [CDES7]
"The study pressure causes the psychological pressure to be very big" [CDES37]

The overall format of teaching and learning was very different for the Chinese direct entry students with the classroom in the UK being a place for information sharing, discussions, and solving practical questions (Li & Campbell, 2008). The activities within the classroom are likely to be varied in the UK and will differ further between lectures and seminars. Textbooks will not often be read during classes and are likely to be referred to as prior or subsequent reading. The respondents highlighted two key differences between higher education in the UK and China associated with the type of classroom activities and assessments. Among the most important factors highlighted were groupwork and independent study, which intensified during COVID-19 due to the absence of traditional face-to-face education Cheng and Agyeiwaah (2022) echoed similar concerns by Chinese students and their disappointment about online studies in the COVID-19 era.

Group work was raised by some respondents as a key difference, with some linking this to issues with 'atmosphere' or 'communication' (Wang, 2012). Mostly, students were neither positive nor negative about group work but noted it as an area that they needed to adapt to. Others identified group discussions as a key method of learning within the UK institution and highlighted this as a difference from their previous learning environment. The respondents were not accustomed to group work:

"In the UK, students can share their views with classmates and teachers and discuss supplements together. This will make the classroom more active and relaxed" [CDES1]
"Although there are group work in Chinese classrooms, they are only grouped when doing presentations" [CDES31]

Although many students had previously undertaken examinations and written work and these are the primary assessments in the UK, assessments and self-study were raised as a challenge. In some cases, it was linked to groupwork assessments which Chinese students were not used to but also the expectations of the assessments. Some students were surprised at the requirement for application of knowledge within assessments. The respondents seemed to be aware of the requirements for autonomous learning, application, and critical thinking, although these areas were highlighted as new to them.

"In China, teachers will arrange everything you should do and give you a lot of homework to do and you do not need to worry." [CDES6]
"In the UK, I need to learn a lot by myself and think more deeply on each topic" [CDES9]

Many students felt it was important to engage with this type of learning to help achieve success in assessments, as shown below:

> *"In China, we don't have seminars in our curriculum. And I think seminars are very necessary to be attended" [CDES12]*
> *"Learning to be a brave person includes courage to raise your doubts with the teacher, courage to share your thoughts with classmates, and the courage to accept your failures and mistakes in learning" [CDES1]*

The respondents advised future students not to just focus on knowledge but also to embed deep learning in order to succeed in the UK's educational institutions. One respondent urged others "*to learn to truly understand what you have learned, not just to memorize*" [CDES1]. Another student recommended "*the more self-reading, the more understanding*" [CDES2]. Reading the slides and attempting questions in advance was important to help with understanding. The students had accepted this was a key part of their learning but also that they wanted future students to adopt this approach. The advice given reflected best practice for all students, with students recognising the need for this level of course engagement.

Proactive learning also extended into self-study and encouraging future students to spend time doing additional reading and homework. This was reassuring as the direct entry students realised the significance of these tasks. Students emphasised the need to encourage future students to focus on their academic studies to avoid being distracted by other activities (e.g., time spent on self-study and responsibility for own learning). One respondent warned students to make a conscious decision not to use mobile phones in class:

> *"Chinese teachers are more rigorous, for example, if a student is playing with a phone in class, the tutor will clear it away. However, once Chinese students arrived in UK, no one constraint them like at home so that some of them will relax themselves and finally their result is not satisfying. So being active and discipline is really important" [CDES8]*

The shift to online classes as a result of COVID-19 worsened the learning environment and experience. Although a few students felt that group work was easier online as it was easier to correspond with other students using online software chatting, overall, the responses indicated a decrease in the effectiveness of the study because before COVID-19 "*the learning environment was more open and active*" [CDES23]. Another student reflected on the challenges that the pandemic caused for academics as they "*can't well motivate and encourage students to integrate well into the learning atmosphere, and they are somewhat powerless*" [CDES25].

> *"The virus has destroyed my studying plan, [...] losing face-to-face seminar lead the problem accumulate to a quite unsolvable amount" [CDES4]*

Given that all direct entry students in the cohort are non-native English speakers, one of the main problems faced by respondents was language. These students expected to improve their communication skills through meeting new people and making friends with peers. The assumed anonymity of online learning was something the direct entry students did not like. Some respondents noted that they felt less confident during online classes in asking something from their teacher. They did not want their peers to think of themselves as less capable as they already have the learning experience of Higher Education.

Miacan and Cocorada (2021) noted that students perceived language as one of the key reasons for their lack of confidence and felt shy or ashamed for low proficiency of their speaking skills. Our findings provide evidence of the perceptions by direct entry Chinese students. Language played a key factor for these direct entry students who did not wish to communicate with the teacher online. Even having some background information about various topics, they stayed quiet during online classes. The frequency of the term 'language', which was raised as an issue and frustration it caused for students, was clearly visible within the answers from the respondents:

> *"Communication is not efficiently and effectively like before, my challenge is that sometimes I got a question, but I do not want other students to know because I worried about that is a stupid question and other students will laugh at me" [CDES8]*
> *"Maybe my spoken English is not very good. Every time I want to answer a question, I need to think about it." [CDES19]*

One of the other challenges observed by Chinese students regarding language deficiency was the lack of attention from teachers due to COVID-19. Respondents emphasised that they felt that teachers were not always aware if they were experiencing difficulties in the online classroom. Studies demonstrate teachers' abilities for remote teaching during COVID-19 (Gao & Zhang, 2020). Some teachers struggle to adapt an effective pedagogy to make learning environment as productive as it was before the pandemic (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). During online class, mostly students turn off their videos for a better connection. Teachers need to assess their students' level of understanding in face-to-face classes but find it difficult to do so in remote learning [CDES34; CDES35], unless students indicate their struggles which was hard for them due to their language inefficiency.

Most direct entry Chinese students reported difficulties in improving their English language skills due to COVID-19. Students did not see language as something that they could proactively resolve. They stated that in online classes they did not have many opportunities to communicate with their peers which had negatively impacted their speaking abilities. Lack of opportunity for direct practice of their language and

communication skills and inability to practice English in a social environment greatly reduced the overall learning experience. These findings add to the existing literature (e.g. Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020) that communication and speaking limitations during COVID-19 have undermined the language development of the direct entry students. However, from the responses it is not clear whether there was any improvement in their writing skills during the pandemic (Karatas & Tuncer, 2020). Speaking skills were largely ignored during the online courses and writing has become the new way of communicating [CDES27; CDES19], replacing speaking.

> *"There is no corresponding English environment to exercise English ability. My current English is still the same as before" [CDES25]*

These students appeared to struggle more than they expected on arrival to the UK. Although all students had met minimum English language requirements as a prerequisite to course entry, in many cases they had underestimated how difficult learning in English would be. The highly abstract and contextualised nature of academic English poses significant challenges for Chinese students (Zhang-Wu, 2021). The subject specific terminology may have increased the pressure on students' language. Clearly introducing various terms with explanations to students within the course and perhaps having recommended terminology as part of pre-reads before students join the course could help alleviate part of this pressure.

> *"I cannot communicate face-to-face with teachers and local classmates. Because the language problem is the most important problem I face in my current study" [CDES 18]*

In line with the finding that many students have difficulties with language, many of the suggestions given in response to the questionnaire related to language support. Students emphasised that there were free English classes available and that direct entry students should take advantage of these to help them. Many students were extremely positive about the experience they had from the English Language support team. Some of these classes were still available online. Therefore, as institutional drivers for recruiting international students are evolving, universities "must innovate not only to grow international student enrolment but also balance it with corresponding support services in accordance with the current educational landscape that advance student success" (Choudaha, 2017, p. 831).

> *"English language centre helps me lot. For example, polishing my essay and teaching me how to structure my report" [CDES 8]*

4.2 Role of teachers

The analysis reveals that words such as 'teachers' and 'tutors' were also frequently used by the Chinese direct entry students during COVID-19, placing importance on the role of teachers in student learning experience, as illustrated below:

> *"Communication with teachers is more meaningful than reading a lot of books" [CDES7]*
> *"More knowledge can be gained by talking face to face with teachers" [CDES41]*

The findings demonstrate the key difference of the role of the teacher. Students described their teacher in their previous institution: "In China, tutor prefer to act as a leader, to guide students through the way, which has been set. In other words, there are relatively less choices for students. In the UK, tutor usually just fulfil an enlightening work, and encourage students to think by themselves" [CDES4]. This different perception of the teacher's role meant that students expected the teacher to provide all the information in the classroom in order to get maximum marks. One student commented that if you followed the tutor's guidance you excelled: "I just absorbed what the teachers tell us and then I can get good marks" [CDES9]. The direct entry students appeared to struggle with the UK approach where they were expected to perform independent work [CDES13], think critically [CDES33], and enhance their learning through additional reading, classroom activities, and independent exercises. The absence of traditional face-to-face learning structure made the experience feel considerably more challenging.

> *"Teachers in the UK may only talk about 50% of the content in class, and students will explore the rest. But in China, our lectures are usually one and a half hours to three hours, and the teacher may speak 80 to 90% of the content" [CDES10]*
> *"The study in China depends on the teacher. In the UK in contrast, I will have more chances to share my thoughts with my classmates" [CDES34]*

This finding of differentiation in expectation may explain why some direct entry students struggle with the transition. Although looking at a traditional cohort of undergraduate students, Gracia and Jenkins (2002) found that the 'Tutor expectation gap' was one of the key reasons for students' lack of success in accounting higher education. They suggested that transition was more difficult where students did not intend to take an active role in their studies and where they expected the teacher to provide all the resources. Additionally, the Chinese students struggled in improving their autonomous learning abilities, as the supervision and intervention from the teachers was minimal during COVID-19 (Zhang, 2022). According to Garcia and Jenkins (2002), the students had commenced university from school and students'

expectations were based on their experiences with their teachers who had frequently focused their teaching on enabling students to pass assessments with very little development of wider study skills. We contribute to the literature (e.g., Garcia & Jenkins, 2002) by providing evidence that the expectation gap seems to apply to Chinese direct entry students.

The different dynamic between teachers in previous and UK institutions was noted by several respondents as a reason not to complete activities. Such an orientation may stem from exposure to more directive forms of learning in China and the development of a reliance on such methods (Lo, 2019). This may make transition into higher education troublesome for the direct entry into the final year students if the shift to more autonomous learning approaches is not effectively managed. In UK higher education institutions self-study is seen as an essential part of learning (Mckendry & Boyd, 2012) with in-class activities making up a relatively small part of student learning. Students who do not undertake the required reading and suggested activities are likely to underperform in assessments in comparison to their peers. Thus, this finding is likely to have a significant impact on the attainment for these students. Universities could aim to increase awareness in conversations with direct entry students which may enhance the student learning.

Respondents urged other direct entry students to communicate with the teacher and emphasised that the teachers were very helpful and supportive. CDES1 noted "when you have questions about your professional knowledge, you can always email your teacher, they are very patient to help you. In the UK, don't be shy, don't be afraid to communicate with your teacher". Some students referred to specific teachers who had offered assistance. All the respondents were positive about their experience when they did ask questions although many accepted that they had perhaps not been as proactive as they could have been during their studies.

In line with Tharapos *et al.* (2022), we found that Chinese direct entry students rely on the support from teachers even more when faced with a crisis environment such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The usual ways to support international students in a face-to-face classroom were no longer available. This could decrease students' ability to learn [CDES25], develop knowledge [CDES28], and "form a relationship with the professor" [CDES22].

Despite the significant challenges faced by academics in the abrupt shift to online teaching (Sangster *et al.*, 2020), the respondents noted that COVID-19 has not affected teachers' supportive attitude towards students at a time of enormous pressure and unprecedented challenges.

> *"They are very friendly and willing to help students with their studies. Very concerned about students' learning status" [CDES41]*

4.3 Lack of cultural adaptation/socialisation

The main result of COVID-19 was lockdown of society, leading to the closure of educational institutions, hospitals, parks. People confined themselves to their homes for safety measures. Universities shifted to online learning closing campuses until further notice. All this had a serious impact on international students who come to study abroad to make new acquaintances and experience the different cultures of the host country. Lack of friendships, isolation, and loneliness was another major impact that COVID-19 had on many direct entry students and restricted their sociocultural approach to form support networks (Alfred, 2009). These effects are particularly nuanced for Direct entry students, who are in the UK for only one year rather than the typical three-year programme. The limited time frame reduces their opportunity to fully engage with the local culture and adapt to the learning environment. They expressed concerns regarding their immobility which affected their personal and educational life. It is evident from students' responses that they are eager to interact with their peers and other social groups. Most students felt that they only interacted with teachers in some online classes. A student responded: "I cannot go anywhere and lost many opportunities to communicate with others" [CDES 4].

Students noted various emotions such as boredom, demotivation, mild distraction, and frustration due to isolation and lack of physical contact, which could have significant implications for the student well-being (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020). These emotions were from the lack of opportunity to socialise rather than from the course content. Students noted their inability to make new friends and found the process of learning online very boring: "I feel boring after the lockdown so I cannot go to the gym or other places for relief which had a bad effect on my study" [CDES 6].

During lockdowns, international direct entry students were unable to access the library, computer labs for active learning, and experienced Internet connection problems. In line with (Calvo *et al.*, 2022) we find that the remoteness of learning led to distress and negatively affected students' learning, but none of the Chinese students' responses indicated homesickness and family.

Another major consequence of COVID-19 was the lack of cross-cultural adaptation of direct entry Chinese students. They choose international tertiary in search of new experiences (Sánchez *et al.*, 2006), where they can learn about new cultures and norms.

> *"Different cultures will affect the perspective of understanding. For example, during the workshop with CIMA, I have a discussion on Chinese consumer's ability with some British peers. We have different opinions, but actually sometimes, different ideas are complementary" [CDES22]*

Due to restricted movement, students were disappointed at not being able to truly experience the UK environment. Most students expressed a desire to travel around the UK and enrich their experience of British culture if the pandemic had not happened: "I could communicate with the peers with no restrictions, and then I could understand more exotic culture, food, or something like that" [CDES 40].

Complementing the research by Al-Oraibi *et al.* (2022), we provide evidence that cultural engagement of direct entry Chinese students was greatly affected by COVID-19. Students acquire different habits from other cultures by experiencing these traditions in a physical learning environment. Online classes made it impossible for students to visit different places and learn about new cultures. The switch to online learning mode hindered their effective integration into this new learning environment.

To support the effective transition of Chinese direct entry students, induction programmes (even virtual) appear as a viable option. Where these students could have the opportunity to meet each other and gain additional support. Adaptation of international students is directly or indirectly linked to their social communication, personal development, academic outcomes, pedagogical, psychological, and other external factors (Gu *et al.*, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2012; Wu, 2015; Bobe & Cooper, 2019). Creating a successful peer learning environment (Boud *et al.*, 2001) can be effective in addressing "isolation and adaptability issues among international students in a way that improves their learning experience and outcomes" (Idris *et al.*, 2019, 1). Several respondents discussed relying on other members of the cohort for social support and advice on where to find key academic information and non-academic support. This was extremely encouraging as peer learning can have strong benefits for students:

> *"By communicating with them, I can understand British culture and broaden my horizon, which will be helpful to me in the future" [CDES 28]*
> *"Student representatives and British peer volunteers are the bridge between students and teachers. This not only can better feedback our real ideas to the teacher, but also allow us to better understand the teacher's teaching ideas" [CDES 13]*

Existing research on international students reports that peer learning practices can be used as a cost-effective way of addressing the increasing diversity in the classroom, smoothing out the integration and adaptation processes, and engaging international and domestic students (Lee & Rice, 2007; Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010; Keenan, 2014; Evans, 2015; Idris *et al.*, 2019). However, COVID-19 restrictions implicated the effective transition of these Chinese students into their new learning environment. The closure of universities and other facilities hindered the additional support these students could receive: "This is exactly what I missed this year. I didn't have the opportunity to get to know local British peers" [CDES 39].

4.4 Discussion summary

Supporting the relationship in the conceptual framework, our findings provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences and challenges of the direct entry Chinese students in the UK educational institutions during COVID-19 (Figure 4). Most students stressed that presence of social interactions with staff and students could have enhanced their learning experience. The results show that online learning was something students were compelled to remote studying because of COVID-19 (Ghazi-Saidi *et al.*, 2020). This resulted in a conflict between the expectations and reality of their learning (Bertram *et al.*, 2014). Already having experience with learning at a Higher Education institution, these direct entry students had different presumptions about UK's learning system which was impacted by the uncertain stressful circumstances during the pandemic. The findings support the relationship between teachers' role and effective integration and learning of direct entry Chinese students. Albeit these students had completely different experiences regarding teachers' role, they articulated the significance of UK's teachers with respect to their learning during COVID-19. Formulating a culturally and linguistically receptive structure is essential for the effective learning and success of international students post pandemic.

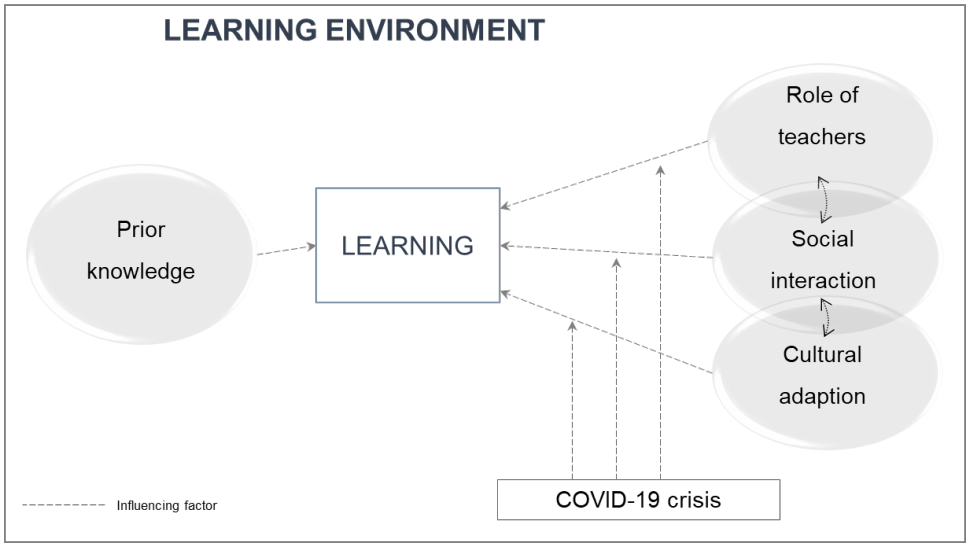

Figure 4. COVID-19 impact on learning environment

5. Conclusion

While some studies provide evidence on experiences of Chinese students, the unique contribution of this study is its primary focus on Chinese direct entry student. Chinese nationals are the largest international student population in the UK. Few

studies have examined this targeted group of students who enrol directly into the final year of a degree programme to consider their unique learning experience and how their experience differs from both home or other international students. We argue that albeit these students might share some similar challenges, the implications of our focus on direct entry students demonstrate the significance of institutional and academic support for this group of students. We contribute to scarce academic literature on the experiences of direct entry (or advanced entry or transfer) students. The cohort studied had the additional challenges posed by COVID-19 and the resulting changes to higher education provision. The interrelationship of this provided a unique opportunity to consider the effect of online learning for a particularly challenging group and to identify and learn lessons on how to support such groups in future.

5.1 Summary of the findings

The findings suggest that the deterioration of the learning environment during COVID-19 created additional integration challenges for direct entry students. Although language barrier problem was reported by previous studies, we find that many students underestimated the degree of difficulty to study in English. We reveal that language problems often lead to a lack of confidence in the classroom, as well as difficulty in communicating and socialising with peers outside the classroom. Language development was significantly affected during the pandemic. Lack of friends, isolation, and loneliness impaired students' mental health and self-motivation to learn, resulting in student inability to adapt to the new environment. We extend prior research by providing insights in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on the learning experience of Chinese direct entry students. We discuss several areas of differences in the learning environment and how this was affected by the new norms of teaching and learning.

The study provides useful insights in relation to the approaches suggested by direct entry students to mitigate or overcome challenges. We find that differences in expectations regarding the role of lecturers (teachers) may be one of the key factors affecting the learning environment and academic performance of Chinese direct entry students due to a lack of integration and cultural adaption because of the pandemic. We evidence that direct entry students rely on tutors support even more when faced with a crisis environment, but we argue that academics should be reflective in selecting approaches to supporting international students. Finally, full-time study in the UK for international students is more than just learning about the UK education programme, as it helps broaden their horizons and provides networking opportunities. Culture, social interaction, and extended experiences are just as important in the UK higher education. The pandemic had a serious impact on international students who come to study abroad to make new friends and experience the different cultures of the host country. This affected the effective transition of

direct entry Chinese students into the final year of study, including the lack of additional support from peers. This caused a lack of motivation, led to depression and anxiety, and well-being issues.

5.2 Contributions

Our study makes important contributions. *First*, we contribute to the accounting and general education literature (e.g. calls by Sangster *et al.*, 2020; Jiang *et al.*, 2021) by providing unique empirical evidence of Chinese direct (advanced) entry students' perceptions of the impacts of COVID-19 on their learning. *Second*, we respond to calls for research on the contextual understanding of Chinese students' experiences (e.g. Heng, 2018) by exploring how direct entry students' learning and new knowledge is shaped by their social interactions and intercultural adjustments when faced with a crisis learning environment such as COVID-19.

5.3 Implications

The findings provide implications for higher education institutions to identify potential problems and solutions. The findings have applicability beyond the UK context. Our empirical evidence on the learning experiences of direct entry students might provide some insights to the higher education institutions in other countries that accept 'direct entry', 'advanced entry', or 'transfer' students. This is particularly important to consider when implementing initiatives in times of crisis.

By adopting a sociocultural framework for understanding educational transition of direct entry students, we argue that direct entry students experience newness associated with change. This transition means they experience the process of searching for meaning and reconstructing the knowledge in a new educational environment or learning situation (Crafter & Maunder, 2012). For educational institutions, we highlight the need to 1) support students socialisation and 2) recognise diverse learning experience. *First*, we stress the importance to focus on the social aspect through facilitating peer relationships or interaction with academics. We evidence the important role of the teacher in cultural adaption. By providing opportunities for social networking and collaboration with staff and students could lead to creating a sense of belonging to the learning community and the development of English language skills. *Second*, students bring individual diverse educational and cultural experiences. Supporting activities for transition can be more successful if they are based on the recognition of such diversity, allowing flexibility and a more personalised rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Support should allow for learning process to take place and provide equal chances for active participation and true integration, by eliminating unconscious bias and recognising diversity instead of adopting fully directive teaching approaches. Notably, a diverse classroom environment is equally beneficial to home students.

5.4 Limitations and future research directions

The findings might be subject to the following potential limitations which present future research opportunities. *First*, we assume that the participants give their true views, but we believe the problem was sufficiently alleviated by reassuring confidentiality and anonymity of responses (Oppenheim, 1966). *Second*, the sample may not represent the views of other direct entry students, thus, future studies may test the generalisability of the results during a crisis environment. *Third*, prior studies investigated academic performance and the attainment of Chinese students in higher education (e.g. Iannelli & Huang, 2014). Future work is needed to examine how a reduced length of study affects the direct entry academic performance, degree classification, or learning experiences of direct entry students to final year study in a foreign university, especially in accounting programmes accredited with professional bodies (Cho *et al.*, 2008; Wang, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2012). *Fourth*, future studies may explore whether academic performance and the attainment of direct entry students to final year vary depending on their background characteristics, such as gender, age, and prior entry qualifications (e.g. prior learning mapping). *Finally*, our findings might imply that the employability of 'COVID' direct entry graduates may be less successful. Future studies could explore whether COVID-19 led to variations in employment opportunities.

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Appendix A. Study participants

Participant*	Year	Gender	FHEQ level***	Previous institution in China
CDES 1**	2020	Female	UG 6	*Preferred not to say*
CDES 2	2020	Female	UG 6	Southwestern University of Finance and Economics
CDES 3	2020	Male	UG 6	China University of Petroleum
CDES 4	2020	Male	UG 6	Beijing International Studies University
CDES 5	2020	Male	UG 6	Shaoxing University
CDES 6	2020	Female	UG 6	*Preferred not to say*
CDES 7	2020	Male	UG 6	Beijing International Studies University
CDES 8	2020	Female	UG 6	Beijing International Studies University
CDES 9	2020	Female	UG 6	East China Normal University
CDES 10	2020	Female	UG 6	Renmin University of China
CDES 11	2020	Female	UG 6	East China Normal University
CDES 12	2020	Female	UG 6	China University of Petroleum
CDES 13	2020	Female	UG 6	Renmin University of China
CDES 14	2020	Female	UG 6	*Preferred not to say*
CDES 15	2020	Female	UG 6	Beijing International Studies University
CDES 16	2020	Male	UG 6	Beijing International Studies University
CDES 17	2020	Female	UG 6	*Preferred not to say*
CDES 18	2021	Female	UG 6	Central University of Finance and Economics
CDES 19	2021	Female	UG 6	Beijing Normal University

Participant*	Year	Gender	FHEQ level***	Previous institution in China
CDES 20	2021	Female	UG 6	East China Normal University
CDES 21	2021	Male	UG 6	South China National University
CDES 22	2021	Male	UG 6	East China Normal University
CDES 23	2021	Female	UG 6	China University of Petroleum
CDES 24	2021	Female	UG 6	Xi'an Kedagaoxin University
CDES 25	2021	Female	UG 6	Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics
CDES 26	2021	Male	UG 6	Central University of Finance and Economics
CDES 27	2021	Female	UG 6	Renmin University of China
CDES 28	2021	Female	UG 6	Renmin University of China
CDES 29	2021	Male	UG 6	Renmin University of China
CDES 30	2021	Female	UG 6	Central University of Finance and Economics
CDES 31	2021	Male	UG 6	Southwestern University of Finance and Economics
CDES 32	2021	Female	UG 6	Xi'an Kedagaoxin University
CDES 33	2021	Male	UG 6	Central University of Finance and Economics
CDES 34	2021	Male	UG 6	Central University of Finance and Economics
CDES 35	2021	Male	UG 6	Central University of Finance and Economics
CDES 36	2021	Male	UG 6	Renmin University of China
CDES 37	2021	Male	UG 6	Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications
CDES 38	2021	Female	UG 6	Central University of Finance and Economics
CDES 39	2021	Female	UG 6	Renmin University of China
CDES 40	2021	Female	UG 6	Renmin University of China
CDES 41	2021	Male	UG 6	Beijing International Studies University

*The participant names were replaced with numbers to preserve anonymity
**CDES=Chinese Direct Entry Student
***FHEQ=The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland

Appendix B. Questionnaire

- Which institution in China did you study at before?
- What is your gender?
- What challenges (if any) did you have arriving to the UK to study in Year 3 directly?
- What are the key differences between studying in China and in the UK?
- What helped you to integrate into the final year of study on the programme?

- What is your feedback on the interactions with British peers? What impact could your interaction with British peers have on your current or future studies or future career?
- What are your key tips of successful studies at a UK University? What is your advice for future Chinese students, direct entrants, who will study in the UK?
- Share your experience of online classes when the University moved online due to COVID-19. What challenges (if any) did you experience?
- Please state what problems you have had studying in the UK because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Please describe what would be different in your education in the UK and your learning experience, if there were no COVID-19 pandemic
- What are the key differences between in-person (face-to-face) classes and online classes for your learning?

Appendix C. Thematic analysis: From basic to global themes

Basic themes	Organising themes	Global themes
· F2f better concentration · F2f better time-management · Lack of concentration with online · online tiring · Benefits of recordings with online · Technology issues with online · Online/detailed materials · Proactiveness in asking questions · Self-discipline · Mental health issues · Lack of self-discipline and motivation · Critical thinking skills · Active, autonomous thinking · Self-study and independent learning · Group work · Academic support classes · Learning differences · Assessment differences · Language barriers · Language difficulties · Language courses	· Learning environment: face-to-face vs online · Benefits of recordings and flexibility · IT and internet connectivity issues · Speed of online classes · Lack of self-discipline and motivation · Type of learning activities and assessments: group work, self-study · Lack of improvement in language/speaking skills	**LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Basic themes	Organising themes	Global themes
· Lack of improvement in language speaking skills · F2f offers speaking opportunities		
· Teaching differences · Lecturer's role in learning · Different teaching style · Different academic level · Tutor support · Personal tutor support · Contact with tutors · F2f better learning environment – tutors can motivate and engage/f2f more efficient · Tutors' willing to help during Covid-19 · Teachers' dedication despite all the pandemic crises	· Expectation gap · Differences in teaching style · Teacher support	**ROLE OF TEACHERS**
· Isolation, integration, adaptation issues · Transition difficulties · Lack of friends · Peer support, community learning · Lack of communication with peers · Unable make friends and build relationships · Lack of networking · Lack of communication with tutors with online · Lack of bonding with tutors and peers · Better cultural adaptation in traditional learning · Lack of exposure to British culture	· Isolation, lack of friendships, Peer learning, Lack of communication with (peers, tutors etc) · Lack of exposure to British culture	**LACK OF CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND SOCIALISATION**

Appendix D. Results of top 50 most frequently used words

Word	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
face	64	3.97
online	54	3.35
class	51	3.17
learning	38	2.36
time	31	1.92
communication	29	1.80
teachers	29	1.80
study	25	1.55
courses	24	1.49
students	22	1.37
different	20	1.24
better	19	1.18
experience	19	1.18
make	18	1.12
English	17	1.06
tutor	17	1.06
problems	15	0.93
think	14	0.87
friends	14	0.87
need	12	0.74
classmates	11	0.68
network	11	0.68
question	11	0.68
recording	10	0.62
understand	9	0.56
atmosphere	9	0.56
discuss	9	0.56
good	9	0.56
language	9	0.56
library	9	0.56
self	9	0.56
answer	8	0.50
China	8	0.50

Word	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
culture	8	0.50
environment	8	0.50
improve	8	0.50
person	8	0.50
talk	8	0.50
take	8	0.50
ability	7	0.43
adapt	7	0.43
British	7	0.43
efficient	7	0.43
life	7	0.43
opportunities	7	0.43
lecture	6	0.37
affected	6	0.37
books	6	0.37
content	6	0.37
difficult	6	0.37