

Mastering the transition: induction activities for Chinese students to facilitate adaption to the UK learning environment

Lianfeng Quan and Dawn Reilly

University of Greenwich

Abstract

Student induction, a key element of transition to university, is of great importance because it marks the initial face-to-face interaction between students and university staff and their introduction to learning in higher education. In the School of Accounting, Finance and Economics at the University of Greenwich, a tailored induction approach is used for incoming Chinese Direct Entry (CDE) students. The goal of this induction is to familiarise CDE students with the United Kingdom (UK) learning environment to counter the academic culture shock which international students can experience. CDE induction begins with sessions which explain UK teaching, learning and assessment approaches, followed by an introduction to the university's library resources. Students then collaborate in small groups, applying the techniques and knowledge they have gained to analyse case studies. This immediate engagement with student-centred learning jumpstarts independent study skills, collaboration and friendships among CDE students.

Key words: academic culture shock, Chinese students, direct entry, induction, library services, transition

Introduction

This paper explores the activities which are incorporated into the induction process for the Chinese Direct Entry (CDE) students who join the undergraduate programmes within the School of Accounting, Finance and Economics (AFE), a part of the University of Greenwich Business School. Although 'induction' may be viewed as lasting over several months (Thomas *et al.*, 2017), a well-executed induction in the initial days and weeks of a student's programme is important as a crucial support mechanism during the first phase of integration into the university community. A bespoke CDE student induction programme begins and facilitates CDE students' cultural adjustment to and social integration into their new learning environment: an effective programme familiarises them with the academic norms of United Kingdom (UK) university systems. While CDE students are not a heterogeneous group and the experiences of individuals may differ (Heng, 2019), they can nevertheless encounter common issues and challenges. Specifically, they can experience academic culture shock on joining a UK university, because they have different educational backgrounds from those already in the UK education system (Bai and Wang, 2022). This issue is not unique to CDE students within Greenwich's international student body, but it becomes even more challenging for them, since they study on their UK undergraduate programme only during its final year, alongside peers already familiar with studying at the University. Therefore, O'Dea (2023) suggests that CDE

Case Study

students under such circumstances need more support than other international students. Hence, at Greenwich, we provide them with bespoke induction as an essential means of support.

Chinese students entering UK higher education (HE) often go through an adjustment period as they adapt to a new teaching and learning approach, designed to foster their critical thinking and independent learning and to provide a well-rounded educational experience that prepares them for future academic pursuits and the global job market. Slaten *et al.* (2016) think that disparities in education systems (including different teaching approaches and university support systems) significantly hinder adaptation. The UK approach may be contrasted with students' experience in China because the Chinese education system often focuses on standardised testing and measures student success by test scores rather than creative problem-solving. This can lead Chinese students to focus on memorisation and test preparation rather than cultivating critical thinking and independent learning skills. The difference in approach is particularly relevant for those Chinese students who enter UK HE directly into the third year of a programme because, in that year, deep learning and critical analysis are required (Reilly *et al.*, 2019). Tran (2013) challenges the view that Asian students are passive learners because of their previous education experience, but suggests that these students need time and support to make the transition to a new learning environment. By offering information about assessment methods, study strategies and available resources, the induction process empowers CDE students to start to navigate more effectively their new academic landscape (Bista and Foster, 2011).

Case study

This case study discusses the induction activities which we provide each year for around seventy CDE students embarking on one of the final-year-entry undergraduate programmes offered by AFE. University students in China and the UK encounter different learning environments which are shaped by different educational systems, teaching methods, cultural norms and societal expectations. These differences can affect the way CDE students learn, interact with lecturers and tutors and prepare for their future careers. Hence, demonstration of UK teaching, learning and assessment approaches can help to familiarise them with the UK learning environment. Reilly *et al.* (2021) believe that the availability of peer support holds notable advantages in enhancing students' belief in their own capabilities. We therefore recruit student ambassadors to help to establish, during induction, social bonds and collaborative relationships among the new CDE students. These ambassadors are Chinese postgraduate students who successfully made their own transition as direct-entry undergraduate students in the past.

Our induction programme for CDE students spans three days, each of which is dedicated to fulfilling particular goals. On the first day, students are introduced to essential information concerning the University, the Business School, their respective programmes and the approach to learning, teaching and assessment which they will experience in the UK. Activities are designed to facilitate initial interactions among students, ambassadors and tutors. Library induction sessions are delivered on the second day. The sessions on the third day are designed around a group case study which requires students to apply the knowledge and skills they have learnt from the previous two days' induction sessions.

Day 1: Learning, teaching and assessment induction

CDE students who come to the UK for HE often experience academic culture shock in various aspects of teaching, learning and assessment. Teaching in the UK tends to be more interactive and student-centred than the traditional Chinese lecture-based approach. O'Dea and Stern (2022) find that students in China typically experience a teacher-centred teaching environment and a lack control over their learning; they are accustomed to following instructions without autonomy. To address these issues, CDE tutors and student ambassadors jointly deliver the teaching and learning sessions on day 1. Tutors lead the sessions by emphasising student-centred learning, where students actively engage with the material, take responsibility for their learning, participate in class discussions and move away from relying on a tutor to impart all of the required information (Oseni *et al.*, 2022). Tutors also explain that many programmes in the UK include small-group seminars or tutorials within their teaching activities. In these sessions, students can discuss topics in depth, ask questions, express their opinions and receive personalised feedback from their lecturers. This approach can be a stark contrast to what students have previously experienced in Chinese university classrooms.

“This introductory programme helped me to understand the teaching and learning styles in the UK and prepared me for what was to come. It made me feel more confident about my studies here.” (Current CDE student A)

“[Induction] gives guidance on the learning styles in the UK; it aims to promote a more inclusive approach to encourage students to participate in discussions, rather than listening only” (Current AFE tutor A)

On day 1, CDE tutors also explain university assessment methods (which include a mix of coursework, essays, presentations and exams), because ‘regular’ assessment throughout the academic year is common in the UK. This differs from the Chinese education system, which often relies on a single final exam to determine a student's grade. Ambassadors provide their own personal examples of how they learned in this environment and which support they found most useful. These activities introduce CDE students to UK teaching and learning approaches and encourage them to use their critical thinking and independent research skills on their programmes.

“[Induction] helped me to better understand the school environment, teaching styles and academic resources, and improved my ability to adapt.” (Current CDE student B)

Day 2: Library induction

Libraries play an important role in facilitating students' navigation through their programme of study (Weaver, 2013). For CDE students, the library provides a gateway to language improvement and cultural integration as well as knowledge and research. Consequently, a thoughtfully devised library induction session plays a key role in facilitating the transition of the CDE students into UK HE. In the UK, libraries encourage self-directed learning, where

Case Study

students are responsible for independently exploring the physical and digital library to find materials and conduct research. This contrasts with some Chinese universities, where library staff are often only involved in guiding students to find the materials they need. Chinese students may find it challenging to adapt to the UK expectation of self-sufficiency in learning, but the library supports them.

During the library orientation session, we collaborate with an Academic Services librarian who specialises in Business. The librarian's role during induction is to acquaint students with the range of library services and to demonstrate the techniques needed to access the resources provided by the University. The librarian also explains the reference styles used in the University because CDE students need to learn and adapt to the UK academic referencing systems, which can be different from those used in China. To ensure an engaging and effective learning experience, the session's content is conveyed through interactive question-and-answer activities. Academic tutors also participate in the library induction by outlining the information or data needed for their modules. This collaborative effort signifies a holistic team approach, by which academic and non-academic staff work together to deliver essential information to the students.

This library induction session enables students to gain valuable insights into the University's library services and how to find information. By means of an early interaction with the librarian, students learn who will help them to access the library's resources. Early exposure to the library as a resource centre and a place for academic exploration can significantly enhance a CDE student's educational experience and academic success in a new learning environment.

“The sessions provided by the library helped me to familiarise myself with the location of the resources, especially when I was doing a lot of independent study. I am very grateful to the school and teachers for the induction course.”
(Current CDE student C)

“[Library induction] is important so that students can participate fully in their research and are not disadvantaged by lack of research materials and how to access them; this means [CDE students] have the same advantages as UK/other international students who have already studied at [the University of Greenwich] for two years and have the knowledge of the library system and how to access it.” (Current AFE tutor A)

Day 3: Group case study and presentation

Piper *et al.* (2020) suggest that exposing students to group work experiences at an early stage in their programme supports a smooth transition into HE. Chinese universities often emphasise collective harmony and cooperation in group work, whereas UK universities value individualism and personal contributions to the group. Chinese students may thus struggle with the shift from a collective approach to one that highlights individual accountability and initiative. Since Chinese students will encounter group case studies and presentations in their UK programme, CDE induction introduces these. Group case study activities encourage effective communication, individual contribution and collaboration skills, all invaluable for

Case Study

students' subsequent studies on their programme. Group sizes are designed to be adaptable, though a suggested range of approximately five or six students per group is recommended, to ensure an equitable distribution of responsibilities for both the work and the following presentation. In the group activities, students are expected to apply the UK learning skills that were introduced on day 1 and access information using the guidance provided on day 2.

At the end of the library induction session, tutors brief the students on the group case study activity which comes on day 3. Tutors explain to the students that the activity will involve collaborative work in small groups, where students will analyse case studies. Analytical tools – such as ratio analysis, which they previously learned in their Chinese universities – can be applied to assess company performance in the case study. This provides a link to their previous programme and builds confidence in their ability to complete the induction task and, importantly, to study on their new programme in the UK. The case study exercise requires students to have good time management and organisation skills and communicate effectively with their peers in English. For CDE students, this provides an opportunity for them to start speaking English to each other and improve their language proficiency both in terms of speaking and listening. They can practise articulating their ideas, giving and receiving feedback and participating in discussions, which are vital skills for their coming classes after the induction week. During the group discussions, tutors and ambassadors are moving around groups to advise students about the learning skills they need to apply. Participating in group activities exposes CDE students to diverse perspectives and varying working styles. This experience fosters adaptation to their new learning environment, helping them understand and appreciate different communication styles and problem-solving approaches.

“The group activities and presentation skills I learnt in the induction were very helpful in understanding how to work collaboratively on assignments and improve communication and teamwork.” (Former CDE student D)

“[Group work] was a successful activity to bring students to work together on a group presentation. It gives them the opportunity to do teamwork. It also creates a comfortable environment for them to speak in academic language and use it to form an argument.” (Current AFE tutor B)

After analysing the case studies, students are required to deliver a group presentation on their findings. Delivering presentations in a group setting helps CDE students build their confidence in public speaking. Comprehensive instructions – such as the content of their slides and the length of the presentation – are provided to students for preparing their presentations. These clear instructions help to instil a sense of confidence. Each presentation lasts for a maximum of ten minutes, thus ensuring that all groups have the opportunity to share their work during the activity. Each presentation begins with a brief introduction to the group members. This mechanism serves as a means for students to expand their social network from their immediate small peer group to that of the broader spectrum of the whole class. Observing fellow classmates deliver presentations enriches their learning experience and fosters cross-group knowledge exchange. After the presentations, tutors provide positive feedback, which builds students' confidence in their ability to study on their UK programmes.

Case Study

“The presentation exercises have helped me to improve my communication skills and understand some of the idiomatic expressions of native speakers. It has also increased my self-confidence and made me less afraid of making grammatical mistakes, as long as I can express myself clearly.” (Former CDE student D)

“The induction programme helped to establish a good bond between classmates and the learning atmosphere afterwards, facilitating our more active participation in school life.” (Current CDE student E)

Discussion

The CDE induction activities outlined in this case study have numerous benefits. Primarily, they enable students to acquaint themselves with the UK study environment and the University's learning resources. This is a valuable step towards effective adaptation to the University's approach to teaching and learning, personal development and academic success. It empowers students to make the most of the UK leg of their educational journey and prepares them for future academic challenges and learning opportunities.

The day 1 induction activities support CDE students' educational journeys by exposing them to different teaching and learning approaches from those they have experienced in China. Students start to acquire essential new learning skills and to improve their English language proficiency. This early opportunity to become familiar with the University's teaching and learning approach can reduce stress among CDE students before the start of teaching on their assessed modules and thereby reduce the well-documented likely academic culture shock. This creates a more supportive and inclusive learning environment which, in turn, leads to a more positive experience for our CDE students and the greater likelihood of their subsequent academic success. The library orientation sessions provided on day 2 play a crucial role in helping CDE students adapt to the academic environment at the University. These sessions empower students with the skills, knowledge and resources they will need to excel in their studies in the UK and contribute to their overall success in and satisfaction with their programme.

The group case study activities on day 3 offer CDE students valuable opportunities to practise using the academic, interpersonal, communication and organisational skills which they learned on day 1. The discussions and presentations made in the case study help CDE students not only to improve their English language proficiency but also to build their confidence in articulating their findings from a case analysis. This is a skill essential to academic coursework in their subsequent programme of studies. In the first week of teaching on their programme, the students will start to work in groups with other students who are not CDE. Working together with other students from different backgrounds is part of the inclusive and international experience which the University provides and which the CDE students value. Therefore, at induction, we prepare them for this by exposing them early to group work with other CDE students. By limiting the group to CDE students, a 'safe space' is created. This ensures that the CDE students, who share the same educational background and face similar language challenges, can collectively adapt to and navigate the new learning style. The shared

experiences within the group foster a supportive environment, easing them smoothly into the student-centred approach fundamental to group work.

Conclusion

Navigating the transition to UK higher education is challenging for CDE students as they grapple with the unfamiliarity of their new academic environment in another country with a different culture. Specifically, academic culture shock can have negative effects on CDE students studying in the UK. Though a common and natural response to the unfamiliarity of a new learning environment, it is both difficult to deal with and detrimental to academic success. Academic culture shock may cause these students to be apprehensive and consequently much less motivated to engage with their studies or to connect with other students. Strategic induction activities, including early encouragement for students to access and use the University's library services (Thomas *et al.*, 2017; Weaver, 2013), go a long way to overcoming these challenges. Through comments from our CDE students and tutors, our case study shows how induction sessions tailored to the specific needs of CDE students can help students to become familiar with the UK teaching and learning environment, thereby boosting their confidence, helping them to deal with academic culture shock and giving them the tools and support they need to be successful on their programmes.

Reference list

Bai, L. and Wang, Y. (2022) 'Combating language and academic culture shocks - International students' agency in mobilizing their cultural capital.' *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000409> (Accessed: 16 September 2023).

Bista, K. and Foster, C. (2011) 'Issues of international student retention in American Higher Education.' *The International Journal of Research and Review*, 7(2), 1-10. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1958362> (Accessed: 31 August 2023).

Heng, T. (2019) 'Understanding the heterogeneity of international students' experiences: a case study of Chinese international students in US universities.' *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(5), 607-623. Available at:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1028315319829880> (Accessed: 30 January 2024).

Case Study

O'Dea, X. (2023) 'Enhancing a sense of academic and social belongingness of Chinese direct-entry students in the post-Covid era: a UK context.' *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 1-12. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2023.2255838> (Accessed: 30 January 2024).

O'Dea, X. and Stern, J. (2022) 'Cross-cultural integration through the lens of loneliness: a Study of Chinese direct entry students in the United Kingdom.' *Qualitative Research in Education*, 11(3), 203-229. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17583/qre.10205> (Accessed: 28 January 2024).

Oseni, R., Adejumo, P. and Kolawole, I. (2022) 'Conceptual analysis of student-centred learning.' *International Journal of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences*, 15-28. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rukayat-Oseni/publication/359887971_Conceptual_Analysis_of_Student-Centred_Learning/links/62550fd9cf60536e23565b43/Conceptual-Analysis-of-Student-Centred-Learning.pdf (Accessed: 16 September 2023).

Piper, I., Kelly, A. and Mulrooney, H. (2020) 'Transition to Higher Education; prospective and retrospective student experiences.' *New Directions in the Teaching of Physical Sciences*, 15(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.29311/ndtps.v0i15.3279> (Accessed: 4 September 2023).

Reilly, D., Sun, W., Vellam, I. and Warren, E. (2019) 'Improving the attainment gap of direct entry Chinese students - lessons learnt and recommendations.' *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 12(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v12i1.932> (Accessed: 30 January 2024).

Reilly, D., Warren, E., Kristandl, G. and Lin, Y. (2021) 'An investigation into the self-efficacy of year one undergraduate students at a widening participation university.' *Teaching in Higher Education*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.2015756> (Accessed: 20 August 2023).

Slaten, C.D., Elison, Z.M., Lee, J.Y., Yough, M. and Scalise, D. (2016) 'Belonging on campus: a qualitative inquiry of Asian international students.' *The Counseling Psychologist*, 44(3) 383–410. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000016633506> (Accessed: 29 January 2024).

Case Study

Thomas, L., Hill, M., O'Mahoney, J. and Yorke, M. (2017) 'Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change.' *Advance HE*. Available at: <https://www.advancehe.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/supporting-student-success-strategies-institutional-change> (Accessed: 20 July 2023).

Tran, T.T. (2013) 'Is the learning approach of students from the Confucian heritage culture problematic?' *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 12, 57-65. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-012-9131-3> (Accessed: 30 January 2024).

Weaver, M. (2013) 'Student journey work: a review of academic library contributions to student transition and success.' *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 19(2), 101-124. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2013.800754> (Accessed: 22 August 2023).