Academic acculturation in 2 + 2 joint programmes: students’ perspectives

Ying Xian Wang and Li Bai

Business School, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT
As a response to the increasing number of Chinese students seeking higher education in Western countries, joint programmes have been set up between universities in these destination countries and China. The unfamiliar host academic cultures can pose challenges for international students. Using the ‘acculturation model’ to frame the study, we interviewed 22 Chinese students on Sino-Australian 2 + 2 joint tertiary study programmes to examine their pre-departure academic acculturation at Chinese home institutions. By comparing and contrasting academic cultures in their home and host universities, the participants reported major differences in academic cultures, particularly in the lecture–tutorial model, learning and teaching approaches, and assessment methods. The findings suggest that these 2 + 2 students were not well prepared at their home institutions for the Australian academic culture. Based on the findings, the acculturation model was extended, with the outcome being a new model constructed towards developing students’ pre-departure academic acculturation on joint programmes.

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Introduction

Australia, one of the most popular destinations for international students, is attracting an ever-growing number of students from across the world. In 2017, the international education industry ranked as Australia’s third largest export earner, and in 2018, more than 25% of enrolments at some Australian universities were international students (Robinson, 2018). Among the total of 510,000 international student intakes in Australia in 2018, 31% were from China (Young, 2018), thanks to the country’s robust economic growth over the past three decades.

As a response to the domestic need for overseas education, many Chinese universities have established partnership programmes with Western universities, including those in Australia. In 2017, Australia had 108 Chinese–Australian joint programmes at the undergraduate degree and above level (Department of Education and Training, 2018). These programmes may take different forms (British Council, 2012), such as: a branch campus, where an Australian university establishes a campus in China and is responsible for academic aspects of the programme; twinning programmes, where an Australian
university has a local Chinese partner to deliver part of their course before students come to Australia to complete the course and obtain their degree award from the Australian university; or franchising, where an Australian university licenses a local education institution to deliver the course developed by the Australian university, who not only confers the degree but also ensures the course quality.

Of the many studies that have examined international students’ academic experiences, very few have researched joint programmes; rather, joint-programme students are often lumped together with those in conventional 0 + 3 or 0 + 4 programmes under the umbrella term ‘international students’. Research shows that familiarity with the destination academic culture can benefit international students’ study (Dooey, 2010; Dyson, 2014; Floyd, 2015), so students prepared with appropriate academic skills may have a very different overseas experience from their unprepared counterparts. Our study intended to fill the research gap by focusing on students in Australian–Chinese 2 + 2 partnership programmes (a type of twinning programme). By examining their experiences of academic culture at partner institutions, this research aimed to determine how well the students had been academically acculturated for their overseas study.

**Literature review**

**Challenges the Australian university academic culture presents to Asian students**

The most frequently reported academic obstacle for Asian students has to do with the teaching and learning approaches adopted in Australian universities (Kettle, 2005; Townsend & Poh, 2008; Tran, 2011; Tran, 2013). Asian students show difficulties participating in class discussions, raising questions, challenging teachers and critiquing their peers. According to Tran (2011), early research, adopting a deficit model, tended to attribute these difficulties to Asian students’ cultural backgrounds. Questioning this deficit discourse, later research gives students a voice and finds complex reasons for their non-participation: they perceive asking questions and expressing personal views as immodest or interrupting class (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Tran, 2013), they feel unsafe in the unfamiliar Western teaching contexts, and they keep silent to avoid appearing silly or losing face (Kettle, 2005). The fact that Asian students can adapt to Western academic cultures suggests that their difficulties may arise from a combination of traditional views about knowledge and their previous learning experiences.

In traditional Asian cultures, knowledge is believed to be received wisdom that is created and passed on from the authority, on one hand, and absorbed and mastered by the recipient, on the other. So, instead of analysing and critiquing knowledge, which is considered fundamental to knowledge advancement in the Western tradition (Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014), Asian students are expected to memorise that knowledge and make sense of it so that it will eventually become part of their knowledge inventory. As knowledge is believed to come from authorities, it is held in high esteem, and so are the teachers (the knowledge possessors). Such a view about knowledge leads to student and teacher roles in Asian culture being quite different from those expected in the Western education system. This view may also affect the time and ease of Asian students’ adjustment into Western university classroom dynamics where the teacher encourages students’ intellectual input and discovery of knowledge by adopting constructivist, student-centred teaching approaches (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Leedham, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).
Asian students’ previous learning experiences may be best reflected in assessment practices. Writing as a form of assessment is another area of reported difficulty for Asian students (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007), and the lack of English essay-writing skills can lead to frustration and even to academic failure for Asian learners (Tran, 2011). In the Chinese education system, students’ academic performance is largely assessed through examinations (Heng, 2018). Chinese students are more accustomed to examinations where they are required to recall information they have learned, and provide short answers to essay questions which do not give much freedom to express their own views (Leedham, 2015). By contrast, academic writing requires reading extensive literature, critiquing it and presenting arguments by following the academic writing conventions that Asian students may not be aware of or familiar with (Wu, 2015). Kinzley’s (2011) study involving student interviewees from mainland China (attending universities in the United Kingdom) attributed their underdeveloped English writing skills to having little experience of writing in both Chinese and English, with writing in English being limited to short compositions or diary entries.

While unfamiliar Western academic cultures present challenges to Asian students, pre-degree/diploma English-for-Academic-Purposes (EAP) courses are found to benefit international students’ academic acculturation (Dyson, 2014; Floyd, 2015). Floyd (2015) compared academic acculturation of international students taking two pathways: direct entry into degree courses and a prior-degree EAP course. The EAP group rated significantly higher than the direct-entry group on their academic skills, such as referencing and citing, oral presentation, in-class performance and essay writing – all of which have been reported as areas of difficulties for international students, especially Asian students (Floyd, 2015). Floyd’s findings support other studies which show that explicit instruction of academic skills in programmes such as EAP courses can facilitate students’ transition into the new academic environment (Dooey, 2010; Dyson, 2014).

Past literature indicates that international students in Australia experience difficulties that arise from their unfamiliarity with the new academic culture, and that prior learning of Western academic skills can ease their adjustment into subsequent university study. As 2 + 2 programmes allocate the first two years to preparing students academically, we intend to find out how well these students were prepared in academic cultural learning for subsequent overseas study. Our hypothesis was, if well-prepared, the research participants would not perceive significant differences in academic cultures between the Australian and Chinese universities.

Acculturation

Acculturation refers to changes that arise from sustained first-hand contact between individuals of differing cultural origins (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovi, 1936). Acculturation is not a product but a process of intercultural adaptation. Situated in the contemporary theories of intercultural contact – the stress, coping and cultural learning approaches – Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) proposed a model of acculturation that incorporates both the macro-level and micro-level factors affecting the acculturation process and outcomes (Figure 1). Macro-level factors include social, political, economic and cultural factors in both the society of origin and the society of settlement. Micro-level factors that influence adaptation refer to characteristics of the person and the situation. At the core
of the process are the challenges that an individual is exposed to in the cross-cultural transition as it involves crucial life changes and contact with people from different cultural origins. These challenges can be psychologically felt as stress, according to the stress and coping approach, and as lack of culture-specific skills as understood from the perspective of cultural learning. In taking up the challenges, an individual needs to develop strategies to cope with the stress and learn culture-specific skills. These actions involve affective, behavioural and cognitive responses to the challenges, which may finally lead to the individual’s psychological and sociocultural adaptation to the new culture; that is, ‘psychological well-being and satisfaction as well as effective relationships with members of the new culture’ (Ward et al., 2001, p. 42) have been accomplished.

Taking Ward et al.’s (2001) acculturation model as a starting point, this study intends to propose that transition does not have to occur after a student’s departure. Stress that the new culture could pose to prospective sojourners before they leave for a foreign land may not be (fully) felt, but cultural learning can take place as a result of predicting the adjustment needs in the new culture. Although Ward et al.’s (2001) definition of cultural learning emphasises the after-departure acquisition of ‘culturally relevant social knowledge and skills in order to survive and thrive in their new society’ (p. 51), we argue that pre-departure academic acculturation can also be instrumental in facilitating transition and
alleviating students’ stress incurred as a result of direct contact with the host country’s academic culture.

**Methodology**

**Research context**

The research site was an Australian university which has collaborative 2 + 2 programmes with a number of Chinese institutions. Most of these programmes are business-oriented; students enrolled in the programmes are mainly business students from Chinese institutions. After two years of preparation in English language and disciplinary foundation courses in China, they enter the Australian university to continue their studies in a chosen discipline. The credits they earn during the foundation business courses at the Chinese institutions are recognised by the Australian university and count as a one-year equivalent of the Australian university’s three-year bachelor’s degree. Depending on whether they need to do a language course at the Australian university, students usually spend 2 or 2.5 years in the Australian host university to complete their bachelor’s degree.

**Data collection and analysis**

After the ethical clearance was obtained from the Australian host university, email invitations were sent to 2 + 2 students at the Australian host university with the assistance of the Business School Dean’s office. The students needed to have completed at least one semester of study in their chosen major in the Australian university to be eligible, as the interview questions involved students’ comparative discussions of various aspects of teaching and assessment between their home and host universities. A sample question was: ‘Do you find any differences in relation to teaching between your home institution and the Australian university?’ Twenty-two eligible students agreed to participate and signed a consent form. A semi-structured, 45–60-minute, one-to-one interview was conducted with each participant at one of the researchers’ office. Qualitative interviews were adopted because this study intended to gain an in-depth understanding of students’ transnational study experiences from participants’ perspectives (Creswell, 2008). We aimed to determine whether the Western academic cultures that reportedly pose considerable challenges to Chinese students were practised/taught in the first two years of the joint programmes in the Chinese institutions. To this end, we focused on asking 2 + 2 students to reflect on differences between the two academic cultures rather than studying direct-entry students as well to compare their experiences with those of 2 + 2 students.

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese for ease of communication and to capture nuances of meaning. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before the interview started, the participants were asked to fill in a form providing their personal details relevant to the research as well as the courses they had learned at home. Of the 22 students, six were female and 16 were male. Eleven were finance majors, six marketing, three accounting, one advertising and one international business. The participants came from four Chinese home institutions.

Thematic data analysis was adopted in analysing the interview transcripts, following Creswell’s (2008) qualitative data analysis model to allow findings to be grounded from
the data. First, the transcripts were read through and divided into text segments. A code label was assigned to each segment using the interviewee’s words or a collection of commonly used phrases. At this stage, the preliminary codes were examined by listing them to check for overlap and redundancy. By eliminating redundant codes and collapsing similar codes, the codes constructed at the early stage were narrowed down to broader themes. Second, the new list of code words was examined to determine whether these codes recorded common themes and recurring patterns. Finally, all transcripts were read again to make sure that themes were appropriate and no text segments were overlooked.

Findings

As part of a larger study examining 2 + 2 students’ language and foundation courses preparation, this paper presents findings concerning their pre-departure academic acculturation. We asked students to compare and contrast the learning cultures of their home and host universities. We kept our questions broad and open-ended so that they did not bias the participants or lead or restrain their answers. Three major themes emerged: tutorials, teaching approaches, and assessment methods. All names used are pseudonyms.

Tutorials

The tutorial theme comprises two sub-themes: non-existence of tutorials at home institutions and the roles that tutorials play in learning.

No tutorials at home institutions

Ten out of the 22 participants remarked that tutorials offered at the Australian university were a new experience for them; two more students suggested their home institutions should consider using the lecture–tutorial model in their curriculum. As these 12 students were from three Chinese partner universities, this emerging theme is, in our view, significant.

While students found lectures at both home and host institutions similar, what stood out for them was tutorials:

The biggest difference is tutorials offered here, where lots of student–teacher and student–student interactions take place (Peng).

At the home institution, the teacher delivers knowledge at the lecture and then leaves us homework to do after class (Shen).

Students had never experienced separate tutorials to which they could bring their exercise answers to discuss with peers and tutors. One student commented on a division of labour between lectures and tutorials: ‘General knowledge is introduced at the lectures, and the application of knowledge takes place at tutorials’ (Kang). As tutorials were designed to target students’ specific questions and knowledge gaps, they liked this fine-tuned way of acquiring knowledge and skills.

Only one of the students who mentioned the difference between tutorials and no tutorials did not regard the split as genuinely helpful, for at his home institution teachers would
sometimes leave some lecture time to discuss homework or for students to apply the knowledge just learned and he preferred this practice: ‘The teacher starts with knowledge presentation, which is immediately followed by knowledge application by students at the same lecture … Immediate application after knowledge introduction better enables students to understand and solve problem[s]’ (Liu).

All the other participants in question, however, liked the time lag between the lecture and tutorial. They believed the interval allowed them to review and enhance their understanding of the lecture content before attempting knowledge application, and that it also enabled them to identify their knowledge gaps.

The positive role of tutorials
Thirteen participants spoke highly of the role tutorials played in their study. They reported that during the tutorials, the tutor helped them digest the knowledge by targeting the difficult and key points introduced in the lectures. This made learning and grasping the content much easier. The following statement by one student is representative of the shared view about the role of tutorials:

I feel tutorials here very useful. There are fewer students [than in lectures], so tutorials are like small-class teaching, which is more targeted. If any students have any questions, the tutor can give a detailed answer. Attending the tutorial following a lecture allows you to find out and amend what you have not grasped. (An)

The participants noted that most of their Chinese classmates attended tutorials. Two students remarked that if they had to choose between lectures and tutorials, they would opt for the latter: ‘First, lectures all have recordings, and secondly … without tutorials I sometimes don’t understand the lecture content’ (Ren). Due to their small size, tutorials were regarded as a venue where students could ask the tutor questions, receive immediate feedback and interact with their peers. Tutorials were viewed as an extension of lectures where learning was enhanced. Three students pointed out that tutorials were very important also because the tutors would unpack assessment requirements: ‘At the tutorial, teachers sometimes talk about how to go about your assignment, what to be expected of an assignment, the key points to include, and how to optimise your assignment’ (Peng).

Although the Chinese students had not had tutorial experiences in their home institutions, they seemed to have embraced such experiences at the Australian host university and reported few challenges in this area.

Teaching approaches
Almost all the participants who did not mention tutorials as the most significant difference made mention of teaching approaches as the major difference between the Chinese and Australian higher education systems. One student’s comment is illuminating:

Chinese teachers still spoon-feed students. They would just talk, talk and talk without stopping. What you would do is just to listen, listen and listen. However, Australian teachers tend to interact with you, encourage you to speak, make you speak, and prompt you to speak. (Jin)
Instead of telling students the ‘correct’ answers and asking them to reproduce the answers as at their home institutions, Australian teachers would make them think, elicit answers from them and emphasise knowledge application. Participants described teaching at their Chinese universities as more traditional and structured: ‘At the home institution, teachers follow PowerPoint slides strictly or follow the textbook; here teachers have no textbooks, but they use more class activities and group meetings’ (Qiao). Compared with the ‘rigid’ (Guo) and ‘boring’ (Xu) teaching at home institutions, the students reported that the Australian university emphasised developing students’ ‘divergent thinking skills’ (Guo). According to the participants, Chinese teachers also tended to transmit knowledge and hand-hold students to ensure their mastery of knowledge and skills, but Australian teachers would leave the study to students themselves or to group learning after they taught the essentials:

If you don’t understand, they [Chinese teachers] will check repeatedly whether you have understood [after they explain it] … But teachers here simply teach what you need to learn; whether you make the effort or not is up to you. (Wen)

While independent and autonomous study is encouraged at the host institution, with assignment-writing, scaffolding is provided. In this regard, one student reported his experiences in the following words:

In a capstone course in our final semester, the teacher asked us to write a case study. In every class, they helped you brainstorm ideas, provided you with information from various perspectives and prompted you to consider different aspects of the case. So when you finally came to write about it, you could pick from all the perspectives the most relevant one(s) to you. This was quite different from what we did at home when what we wrote was quite empty and general, without many details. (Zhang)

It seems that Australian teachers taught students how to learn, but Chinese teachers emphasised the acquisition of knowledge itself.

Despite mostly positive comments about the Australian way of teaching and learning, some students were critical of it. Two students complained that Australian education did not provide them with value for money because they felt that their learning was mostly self-directed:

The tuition fees I’ve paid are a waste because I only get some learning resources from them such as PowerPoints, etc. What is the use of teachers? You have to read and do everything by yourself. Teachers are only useful when you ask them questions about the format and structure of the assignments. (Wen)

Another student commented that due to language problems, he did not quite understand his teachers and therefore had to rely heavily on self-teaching. In comparison, these students felt Chinese teachers were more responsible and their teaching was more comprehensive.

**Assessment**

**Assessment format**

Twenty participants noted that the most-used form of assessment at their home institutions was (final) examinations, whereas the Australian university adopted more diversified assessment techniques, such as an essay or a report-writing assignment, individual or group presentation, case study, reflection or mini-market simulation. Here are two typical comments from students:
At my home university, there were just exams. If you passed them, it was ok. (Dong)

In Australia, assessment is diversified. Generally, there are three pieces of assessment: one or two assignments, plus a final exam. Sometimes, a presentation or homework portfolio is included. (Shen)

The participants also pointed out that assessments at their home institutions focused on individual performance, but in Australia teamwork was also stressed:

Team assessment is actually exhausting… You need to learn how to collaborate with team members. You not only need to do your part but need to communicate with others and schedule time together. You need some social skills, and can’t just say ‘I am very smart’ and act arrogantly without considering others’ feelings. (An)

The participants found learning in Australia to be more intensive and extensive due to the way assessment was designed and conducted; for example, ‘Examinations at home test mainly theoretical knowledge and are textbook-based… but here, examinations may test more practical stuff’ (Bai). Home institution teachers would usually tell students ‘the key knowledge points’ (Cao) in a subject for them to review for examinations, whereas ‘they [Australian teachers] would not tell you what is the most important, and you need to be self-relying and review all the learning content’ (Cao).

The participants also noted that final examinations played a dominant, crucial role in determining a student’s fate at their home institutions:

At home, if you learn by heart all the contents within the exam scope, it is easy to get high marks, but failing the exam is equally easy if you do not put in time memorising them. Whereas in Australia there are essays, presentations as well as exams. (Wen)

Given the practice in China, the students might not feel any pressure during the non-exam period but may feel great pressure when an exam was approaching.

Four participants remarked on the different attitude towards academic integrity concerning assessments in different institutions: ‘At home, although we also have presentations [as an assessment form], the criteria are quite loose, and teachers usually let you pass. In Australia, however, teachers are more business-like and not sympathetic’ (Peng). Similar comments were made by another student about the haphazard way presentations were conducted by students but who still received pass marks. Still another student mentioned his experiences concerning plagiarism: ‘At home, some students just cut and paste other people’s words without acknowledging the sources on their presentation slides, and we did not know that was not allowed until we came here’ (Ren).

In addition, some participants reported some exposure to group work in their home institutions, but they pointed out that such activities were the initiatives of one or two individual teachers and as sporadic as class presentations. In other words, such activities are not institutionalised or built into the curriculum.

Preferences

Thirteen participants articulated their preference for the assessment models adopted at the Australian university. They pointed out that the diversified assessments would no doubt enhance learning, providing reasons such as:
You are forced to continuously study throughout the semester (Ren);

It restricts the possibility of cramming for exams (Yuan);

As the assessment covered a wider range of knowledge and skills, you learn more (Shen);

Presentations and essays assess students’ understanding and synthesis of knowledge (Ren).

They also commented on how such an assessment system helped develop different skills and abilities in students: ‘I like group assessment … You will definitely learn something from teamwork, and there is also thorny stuff to handle. Isn’t this a process teaching you how to problem solve and how to coordinate?’ (Dong).

Others remarked on the benefits of diversified assessments beyond their academic value, such as fairness, inclusivity and being motivational, for example:

The diversified assessment better reflects students’ genuine performances (Kang);

It evaluates your performance in a comprehensive way (Jin);

Your motivation for learning won’t be affected just by the poor result of one single assessment … Diversified assessments provide more opportunities to improve your results, so it is more scientific (Feng);

[The] Final result is derived from more than one assessment rather than from one examination, so the pressure is not as great (Cao).

Some students preferred the diversified Australian model of assessment for practical reasons. For example, Zhang remarked that he liked essay-writing assignments and was scared of examinations because he could receive 65%–70% from the former assessment type but only 50% from the latter. Another student preferred assignments to exams for a different reason: ‘My comprehension of English is not so good, and I have poor memory. Besides, no dictionary is allowed at the examinations’ (He).

Despite the overwhelming preference for the Australian assessment model, a few students expressed their preference for exams. Ouyang thought exams were easy because essay writing required extensive reading and referencing, although he admitted that, for learning purposes, the Australian model was better. Peng was more used to examinations in China:

To submit a few assignments within a short space of time is very exhausting, which is not greatly conducive to one’s study’ and ‘Only with examinations [do] you have a clear goal. It is already my habit to revise well before exams.

Although the students’ enrolment statuses by October 2019 show that 21 of the participants completed their degree with one still studying, their average GPA (Grade Point Average) was only 4.48/7. Most participants’ initial academic experiences were extremely frustrating as illustrated by the following remarks:

When we first came, essay writing was totally beyond me. … Never learned. Neither taught at home, nor here. … This problem was truly truly serious! I completely freaked out. (Liu)

I wonder whether before 2 + 2 students start their studies here, information sessions can be held to tell them how teaching at the Australian university is conducted. (Kang)
Discussion

Our hypothesis was that if the 2 + 2 students were well-prepared in academic acculturation, they would not perceive significant differences in academic cultures between the Australian and Chinese universities. However, the participants identified three major areas of differences. These areas of differences, though separate, are interrelated.

First of all, tutorials being offered as a supplement to lectures at the Australian university was identified as one of the major differences, and almost all participants who raised it perceived tutorials in a positive light. This is an emerging theme that has not yet been reported in previous research. According to participants, almost all the teaching at their home university took the form of lectures. While some Chinese lecturers also left some time for knowledge application, tutorials at the Australian university seemed to play a greater role in student learning: they were more focused, interactive and individualised, and were where learning was enhanced. The difference in offering/not offering tutorials between the Chinese and Australian universities is not superficial, as indicated by one participant. Instead, it reflects the difference between constructivist and traditional conceptions of learning and teaching (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). At tutorials, students are no longer a passive receiver of knowledge; rather, they collaborate with their teachers and peers in constructing knowledge. Teachers no longer simply give solutions to all problems; instead, they provide scaffolding activities for students to find their own answers to real-world problems. The reported lack of tutorials at Chinese universities supports the contention that student-centred learning is yet to translate into teaching practice in China (Rao & Lei, 2014), despite decades of promotion and the large body of evidence supporting it – including that from Chinese researchers (e.g., Hou, 2015; Ning & Hornby, 2014). The inhibitors could be teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning (Rao & Lei, 2014), students’ suspicions about peer learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006), and a lack of qualified teachers for conducting a larger number of smaller-sized tutorials.

Secondly, participants identified differences in teaching practices in the two systems. In contrast to the Australian academic culture that stresses dialogic knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, open-ended and autonomous learning, Chinese teaching approaches tend to be didactic, structured, textbook- and test-based, with lecturers often spoon-feeding students. Some students, therefore, considered Chinese teachers to be more responsible and caring because they try to ensure that students learn; however, they do not seem to trust students’ autonomy. Australian teachers appeared not as controlling, giving students more freedom to explore on their own but could be viewed as irresponsible by some participants. These findings in general support previous studies about learning and teaching approaches and the (expected) roles of teachers and students in Asian and Western educational contexts (e.g., Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014). The fact that participants from all four Chinese universities reported this difference demonstrates the deep-rootedness and prevalence of the traditional approaches in the Chinese home institutions. While students appreciated the effort of their home university and conscientious teachers in English and foundation courses preparation, teaching at these universities was nonetheless teacher-dominated, and students were not given much responsibility for their own learning. Being educated in an academic culture that does not encourage knowledge construction through collaborative learning, Chinese students may transfer this passive
learning style to the Australian academic environment and find Australian classroom dynamics difficult to adjust into (Tran, 2013).

As participants who mentioned tutorials as a major difference and those who presented teaching approaches as different rarely overlapped, we argue that each group focused on a unique aspect of the two academic cultures. In essence, both groups perceived the differences between Australian and Chinese universities as those between traditional conceptions of teaching and learning, and the constructivist notions about teaching and learning.

Participants’ comments concerning the traditional teaching approaches and teacher–student relationships indicate that some have started to question the old learning culture and role assignment, and are embracing the constructivist conception of learning and teaching. Students’ post-departure awareness of these academic differences suggests that in the 2 + 2 programmes, Western academic culture is mostly ignored on the Chinese side. Instead, it is treated as a hidden curriculum (Hall, 1998), left to be learned by students themselves after arrival. Although most students’ adaptation processes appeared proactive and committed, consistent with what Tran (2011) observed, they could have been saved considerable pain had they received explicit pre-departure instruction about the Western academic culture.

The third area of reported difference about assessment also corroborates past findings on the experiences of Chinese students in other contexts (Heng, 2018; Wu, 2015). For instance, Chinese students reported unfamiliarity with the American assessment format, criteria and expectations (Heng, 2018), and found their old strategies for examinations in China not as effective in the British university context and that being critical in essay writing posed a challenge (Wu, 2015). Coming from an exam-oriented learning background, adjusting to the Western assessment approach is one of the most reported challenges by Asian students (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007). What makes the situation worse is participants’ unexpectedness or even unawareness of the diversified, real-life oriented assessment format adopted at the Australian university. As assessment directly affects a student’s academic success, little awareness of and limited academic skills for Australian assessment practices could bring serious consequences, as pointed out by Tran (2011). This may explain why a majority of the participants regarded assessment as a major difference. As prior learning of academic skills and readiness for the new culture gives students more confidence and help them overcome the difficulties that direct-entry students usually experience (Dyson, 2014; Floyd, 2015), the 2 + 2 participants could have had a smoother transition had they been taught academic skills during their two years in China. Participants’ preference for the Australian assessment scheme due to its benefits for learning makes it relevant for Chinese universities to modify their own assessment schemes.

The different academic cultures reported by the participants show that a gap exists between the constructivist approach at the Australian university and traditional teaching culture at the Chinese institutions. Such a gap indicates that the partnership programmes seem to have ignored preparing their students in academic acculturation. According to Ward et al. (2001), acculturation can be facilitated through learning culture-specific skills by people who start contact with the new culture. This study contends that for 2 + 2 programmes, such learning should commence before a student’s departure. In order to assist the pre-departure academic acculturation of the 2 + 2 students, the findings from this study and the past literature have led to a new framework towards enhancing
Chinese students’ academic acculturation (Figure 2), which originated, and yet differs, from Ward et al.’s (2001) acculturation model.

In the above framework, the Chinese and Australian university academic cultures are the cultural variables at the macro level. As the findings show, the two cultures differ in teaching and learning styles, the roles of teachers and students, and assessment techniques used. Since this study primarily focused on cultural-level factors in partner institutions, micro-level or individual-level variables in Ward et al.’s (2001) original model are omitted. The cultural variables impact on all three stages of the pre-departure academic acculturation process; however, their influences on ‘Institutional Responses’ and ‘Enhanced Academic Skills and Reduced Stress’ are more indirect than those on ‘Anticipation on Academic Skills Required for Overseas Study’ (see Figure 2). These cultural variables directly inform the partner institutions to make predictions about the different academic skills students may need for their Australian study. As a result of the anticipation, collaborative partners respond by developing the required academic cultural skills. Equipped with these skills, students may have a reduced level of stress after arriving at the overseas institution.

The 2 + 2 partner institutions can use this framework to guide students’ academic acculturation during their first two years at home. Based on the findings from this study concerning the differences in academic culture, the collaborative partners can anticipate the academic skills that students may need in the Australian (and other Western) academic context. The Australian partner can also provide information about the Australian academic culture with respect to learning and teaching approaches, students’ expected academic skills and assessment forms. Chinese universities could consider modifying their model of content delivery and teaching approaches (such as offering tutorials, encouraging more classroom interactions, group work and peer learning) as well as

Figure 2. Pre-departure academic acculturation of 2 + 2 programme students.
their assessment methods (such as considering essay writing as a form of assessment). As a means of quality assurance, Australian universities need to provide professional development for Chinese academics so that these modern concepts of teaching and learning are not simply rhetorical. This could be a large undertaking, given all the inhibitors for the paradigm shift in Chinese universities generally: teachers’ beliefs and competence, class size, institutional support and students’ attitudes (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2010).

However, if these changes benefit and facilitate students’ academic acculturation, ways need to be explored and actions need to be taken.

**Limitations and future research**

This study aimed to determine whether the 2 + 2 programmes provide students with prior academic acculturation, and the data were collected from a sample of 22 students about their experiences and perceptions of the differences in academic cultures between Australian and Chinese universities. Future research can, however, examine academic acculturation by comparing, on a larger scale, the academic acculturation experiences of 2 + 2 students and direct-entry students to put the issue in a broader perspective, although this study suggests 2 + 2 Chinese students may not be significantly advantaged in academic acculturation.

This study primarily focused on the macro-level factors influencing students’ adaptation, namely, the academic cultural factors. Future studies can explore the effects of micro-level variables on students’ acculturation, taking into consideration students’ individual characteristics and circumstances.

The proposed framework is based on a small-scale study. Future research can examine the validity of the framework by studying students in more 2 + 2 programmes in diversified contexts for more student input or by using the model as a guide for academic acculturation of students on 2 + 2 (or other joint) programmes with the view to improving/modifying the model.

Despite these limitations, this study is significant for its theoretical and practical contributions to international education research. Theoretically, the study constructs a framework of pre-departure academic acculturation of 2 + 2 programme students. It extends Ward et al.’s (2001) acculturation model by adapting it to the context of academic programmes in educational institutions, arguing for the necessity of joint programme students’ pre-departure acculturation. Practically, the framework could provide the partner institutions of the reported joint programmes and other similar (future) programmes with an initial guide on how to facilitate students’ pre-departure transition into the Western academic culture.

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