

# A CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

## 1.0 Introduction

Abraham (2006) has pointed out that prior studies in accounting education have mostly concentrated on the teaching context or the learning outcomes. There is little research conducted on the perceptions of the learning context by the accounting students themselves, and more specifically, the perceptions of international accounting students. As indicated in a recent international student survey, there were approximately 143,000 international students studying in Australian universities between March and May 2010 (International Student Survey, 2010). Further, Australian Education International (2009) highlighted China as Australia's largest market for international students. The provision of education for international students is important to Australia, as it has become Australia's third largest services export (Sawir, 2005). Further, any improvement in the educational experience of international students will pave the way to building a more positive reputation for Australian institutions and subsequently a source of revenue for Australia (Sawir, 2005). Therefore, with the increasing numbers of Mainland Chinese students coming to Australia for tertiary education in recent years, there is a need to better understand the learning experiences of Mainland Chinese students. As the shared values of Chinese students are very different from those in Western countries, arguably so are their learning experiences.

The literature indicates that generally, international students from a non-English speaking background have greater difficulties adjusting and adapting to a Western university learning environment when compared to students from an English speaking background. Studies by Lee and Rice (2007), Hechanova-Alampay *et al.* (2002) and Mori (2000), have indicated that the key factors contributing to the difficulties international students face include country of origin (in terms of language and culture); inadequate social support from the host country; obstacles in forging friendships; and associated negative experiences in the host country. Thus, this study is motivated by a need to understand the interaction between Mainland Chinese students and their learning environment, namely, the teaching and teacher/student relationship. There have been some empirical studies on the learning of international Chinese students in a Western environment that have been documented in the literature. However, this study adds to the literature in that it looks specifically at Chinese students from Mainland China studying accounting, hence excluding Chinese students from other Confucian heritage countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong etc, who are generally more exposed to Western values and teaching styles. Further, the data collection via focus groups was conducted in Mandarin, the mother tongue of the participants, which adds to the richness and quality of the data gained and the analysis undertaken. This paper makes an important contribution to the limited literature on students' perceptions of their learning experience in the field of accounting, by deepening our understanding of how Mainland Chinese students' perceptions of the teaching in Australian universities evolve over time.

## 2.0 Literature review

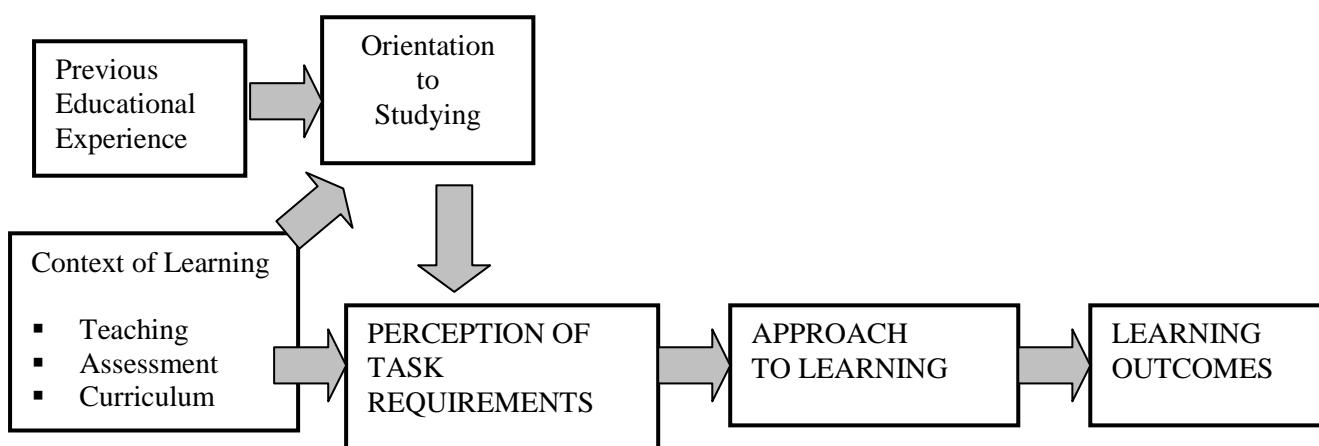
### Conceptual Framework

According to Ramsden (1981), research from the standpoint of the students (rather than that of the educator) can provide more profound knowledge of student learning in a university environment. A more favourable learning environment in the eyes of the students will in turn promote more conceptual and deeper forms of learning and hence, better learning outcomes. Prior to the work by Marton and Saljo (1976), researchers had paid very little attention to examining how students learn, or the process of student learning. As a result, little was known about the effects of the learning context such as the teaching, assessment demands and course organisation on students learning (Entwistle and Rasmden, 1983). In an attempt to understand students' learning, Biggs (1979) introduced his 3Ps model, namely, *presage*, *process* and *product*, which explains the relationship

between the teaching/learning context, learning processes and learning outcomes. Building on Biggs 3Ps model, Ramsden (1992) further developed a model called the ‘Student Learning in Context’ (see figure 2.1), to ‘...demonstrate how the student’s intention (to understand or to reproduce) interacted with the process of studying and how these processes and intentions were reflected in the quality of understanding reached’ (p. 82). The model looks at a chain of relations at different levels of generality, rather than a single causal sequence of events.

Drawing from Ramsden’s (1992) student learning context model, this paper investigates Mainland Chinese students’ classroom perceptions and their response to their learning in Australia. This study does not examine the “approaches to learning” nor “learning outcomes” in Ramsden’s model. It does, however, consider previous educational experience in Mainland China, which impacts on their orientation to studying and thus their perception of task requirements.

**Figure 2.1 Student Learning in Context Model**



Source: Ramsden, 2003, page. 82

### Students’ perceptions

The influence of students’ perceptions of the learning/teaching context on their learning is widely documented in the education literature (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Ramsden, 1992, 1997; Entwistle *et al.*, 2002). More specifically, Ramsden (2003) considered how students’ perceptions of teaching, assessment, course content and structure within the natural setting of academic departments, influence the way students learn. As depicted in figure 2.1, students’ perceptions will affect the approaches they adopt in their learning and subsequently their learning outcomes. Therefore, the focus is not on the framework of courses and assessment itself, but rather on what the students construct out of this framework. In other words, Ramsden emphasised that it is the students’ response to their views of the learning/teaching environment that is important, and as such may not necessarily be the same as how the educators perceive it.

### Teaching

Given that students’ perceptions are the key influence on how the learning materials are regarded and students’ choice of study and learning approaches (Entwistle, 1987; Hassall and Joyce, 2001; Entwistle *et al.*, 2002), this paper focuses on one of the most critical aspects of the context of learning, namely, teaching. According to Entwistle *et al.*, (2002), students’ learning is generally more affected by their perception of the teaching than by the method of teaching itself. Teaching does not only include teaching methods but also teacher/student relationships, as interaction with teachers is equally important in the university learning environment (Ramsden, 1979; Asmar, Prout and Inge, 2004; Tan and Simpson, 2008).

In research by Scott (2006), it was found that engagement with teachers is most highly valued by students in their learning. Accordingly, it was reported that students want ‘...practical, interactive, face to face learning with stimulating teachers’ (Scott, 2006). The extensive database developed by Scott is a three year project that looked at student feedback in order to help lift the teaching standards and improve student retention rates in Australian universities. The study reiterated the importance of teachers’ commitment in students’ learning. It also highlighted the characteristics of teachers who best engage students in productive learning and include the following (Scott, 2006, p. xvi);

- committed to and enthusiastic about their area of teaching and research;
- accessible and responsive to their students and genuinely interested in their progress;
- actively interested in receiving student feedback on how the course is going, and promptly make necessary adjustments and improvements to its delivery in the light of this feedback;
- highly skilled in the area taught and have up-to-date links to and knowledge of current professional and disciplinary developments that they consistently draw upon to illustrate and give focus to the key points they want to make; and that they are
- skilled adult educators—people who understand that they are designers of active learning experiences rather than just transmitters of knowledge.

The study by Tan and Simpson (2008) on international students in New Zealand concluded that students expect academic staff to possess industry experience, excellent communication skills and be readily available to students. Interviews by Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) reinforce the significance of the teaching quality and attitude of lecturers as they influence students in their approach to studying. More specifically, according to Ramsden (1979, 1981), lecturers who taught badly could discourage positive attitudes towards learning. On the contrary, when the teaching is effective in terms of assistance with approaches to studying and genuine commitment of the teachers in the subject and the students’ learning, positive attitudes towards learning could be encouraged and students would likely be more engaged in their learning. The original research by Ramsden (1979, 1981) is supported by the work of Gow and Kember (1990); Lizzio *et al.*, (2002); Prosser, (2000) and more recently Nijhuis *et al.*, (2007), that students’ perceptions of good teaching, clear goals, appropriate workload, appropriate assessment and independent learning are positively related to a deep approach to learning.

### **Previous Educational Experience**

Students’ interpretation of their previous educational experience and learning backgrounds has a significant influence on their orientation to studying and capabilities in learning (Honkimaiki, Tynjala and Valkonen, 2004; Dochy *et al.*, 2002; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). This is also observed by Guild and Garger (1998), who highlighted the influence of individual’s early life experiences, as well as cultural values, on one’s learning. Gardner (1991, p. 38) echoes this perspective: ‘[W]e are as much creatures of our culture as we are creatures of our brain’. Recent work by Abhayawansa and Fonsecam (2010) on students from Sri Lanka also strongly supports such a notion. Further, literature has indicated that the teachers in most Asian countries are expected to take on the responsibility to lead their students both academically and morally.

In Mainland China, the relationship between teachers and students is often viewed as similar to the relationship between parents and children. Such a relationship is part of the influence of Confucian values (Chan, 1999; Heffernan *et al.*, 2010) and is hierarchical. Further, the role of the educator in Chinese culture is to impart absolute knowledge onto her/his students, while students are expected to receive that knowledge without questioning it. The students are accustomed to receiving knowledge in a passive manner, as interactive methods of learning and teaching are rarely practised (Samuelowicz, 1987a; Cortazzi and Jin, 1997). Generally, teachers in China are expected or perceived to have all the answers. It very much resembles the practice of a master/disciple relationship, where the master’s knowledge is expected to be unquestioned and unchallenged by their disciples. Similarly, in other Asia countries such as Japan, the teachers’ role is accorded great respect and students relate to their teachers with a kind of veneration which leads to a humility-type

of learning approach (Ginsburg, 1992). Therefore, if these students volunteer either questions or an answer, it may denote a lack of respect for the teacher. In most Asian countries, if students challenge, question (for reasons other than clarification) or argue with their teacher, it is viewed as attacking the teacher's competence. According to Samuelowicz (1987b), this excessive regard for authority by Asian students towards the teacher leads to their readiness to accept all that they are taught without questioning and most often expecting the teacher to give the "correct" solutions to problems. Further, in China, students are accustomed to finding staff ready, willing and able to talk to them privately and at length, without an appointment. Students and lecturers may have dinner together, go out together and develop close personal mentoring relationships, very much reflecting the Confucian master/disciple tradition (Cheng, 1994).

Therefore, drawing on students' previous educational experience in China, the research questions of this paper are as follows:

- How do Mainland Chinese students perceive the teaching they experience in Australia?
- How do Mainland Chinese students perceive the teacher/student relationship they experience in Australia and what influence (if any) does it have on their learning?

### **3.0 Method**

A focus group approach to data collection is employed in this study. Interestingly, qualitative method such as through the use of focus groups and interviews has not been widely adopted in accounting research. The ability to capture the original 'voices' of the participants within the context in which it occurs is vitally crucial in this study and hence qualitative method is preferred over quantitative method. As Berg (1995, p.3) explains, qualitative approach are able to capture those experiences that '...cannot be meaningfully expressed by numbers'. In addition, given that the Chinese students will only speak up in small groups (Hofstede, 1986), a focus group approach is most appropriate to the participants of this study, compared to individual interview. The approach also has the ability to promote self-reflection, where the views, stories and reflections of Mainland Chinese students could emerge more freely in the discussion than in a traditional face-to-face individual interview. Miller (2003) further recommends that interviews with students be conducted in their first language where possible to avoid the barrier to productive communication. In this study, the focus groups were conducted in Mandarin. The participants were generally delighted to have the discussions in their mother tongue ie, Mandarin, so much so that a few participants commented during discussion that '...no one has actually cared enough to hear our views, we should have this sort of discussion more often..' and as a result, the participants contributed freely. Therefore, conducting the focus groups in Mandarin is considered an advantage in this study, as it enabled the participants to comfortably and freely discuss their perceptions and experiences. In this way, it was possible to capture, articulate and develop responses in the mother tongue of the participants, which would not have been possible if the focus groups were administered in English.

#### **3.1 Data collection**

The participants in their respective years of studies were invited to participate in the focus group discussions from two universities. The invitations to participate were offered to Mainland Chinese students prior to the commencement of lectures, where the contact details of interested students were recorded. Only students from Mainland China who came to Australia directly for tertiary education were invited to participate. Each focus group was targeted to have approximately five to six students. In order to cope with possible attrition, additional students were invited and later confirmed for the scheduled meeting. Unfortunately, some of the students who had accepted the invitation to participate in this study failed to attend on the scheduled day of discussion. Nonetheless, despite the lower than targeted number of students, the discussion went well, where students who turned up freely discussed their views.

The focus groups discussions were conducted in a private interview room at the first university and meeting rooms at the second university's library, to allow for confidentiality. In the scheduled meetings, semi structured discussion questions were posed to the group, allowing for a relatively free

response and yet ensuring a degree of comparability. Each participant was encouraged to discuss openly and given opportunities to present her/his views. With the consent of the participants, all discussions were audio tape recorded for transcription purposes. To mitigate the issues that arise with the use of audio tape recording, field notes were maintained throughout the study and to assist with identifying the participants during transcription. Basically, the initials of the participants were recorded accordingly and referred to during transcription, in order to keep track of who said what and to clarify verbal contribution during conversational overlap. This also keeps an account of the types of group interaction and dynamics, besides recalling comments that are unclear on the tapes.

The focus group schedule was an adaptation of that used by Ramsden (1981) in his seminal research on the learning context. As suggested by Wilkinson (2008), attention was given to explore if the focus group questions were likely to engage the participants in discussion, and whether the questions themselves flowed logically and permitted different viewpoints. It was found via the conduct of pilot groups that the participants were engaged with the structure of the questions and were willing to openly share their perceptions. As a result, only minor amendments were made to the wording of some of the questions to improve clarity and reduce any ambiguous words or meanings. There were two pilot groups of final year students and each group consisted of 4 to 5 students in total. The following outlines the kind of questions posed to the participants.

- Teaching. Participants were encouraged to talk about their personal experience of the teaching (method, pace, enthusiasm, attitude etc), the way they learn and how the teaching influenced their learning (if any). Students were asked to discuss their experience of the teaching back in China, as well as the teaching in Australia.
- Teacher/student relationship. Participants were asked to discuss their relationship with their teachers (frequency of contact, availability, how accommodating etc), how friendly (approachable, helpful etc) they perceived the teachers to be, and the impact of the teacher/student relationship on their learning (if any). Participants were asked to discuss their experience both in China and in Australia.

### **3.2 Selection of Participants**

The participants in this study were students studying an undergraduate Business degree (majoring in Accounting) at two universities in Victoria, Australia. The two universities were chosen because they are of comparable status, provide similar accounting courses and both have a large number of international students from Mainland China. The content of the accounting studies in both universities is fundamentally the same, with a similar minimal requirement of English using the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) entry score. All participants were full time students, with the majority of the students (77%) aged between 20 to 23. As the variation in age is not significant, the study does not analyse the findings by age. In total, there were 26 participants. Of the 26 Chinese participants, 24 spoke Mandarin as their first language, while the remaining 2 regarded Cantonese as their first language and Mandarin as their second. All the participants had no prior experience of Western or overseas education, as they have undertaken their preschool, primary and secondary years in the Chinese educational system in Mainland China.

With the focus groups, participants were grouped into 6 groups, totalling 26 participants. There were 3 groups of Mainland Chinese students at each university and thus a total of 6 groups. The participants were in their first, second and final year of studies. There were a total of 8 (30%) participants in their first year of study, 9 (35%) in their second and 9 (35%) in their final year. Students completing their second semester of first, second and final year accounting studies were selected. It was believed that, having almost completed the respective year of studies, the students would be in a good position to offer informed comment on the teaching which had influenced their way of learning during their year of studies. Further, of the 26 participants, 8 (30%) of them are male and 18 (70%) female. The gender split is relatively representative, as 60-70% of Chinese accounting students in Australian universities typically tend to be female.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The Mandarin discussions in focus groups were translated literally into the English language and transcribed using Microsoft Word. All focus groups were transcribed to facilitate data analysis. It is important to note that transcripts are not an exact representation of the focus groups' discussion. As Kvale (1996, p. 165) points out, '....transcripts are not copies or representations of some original reality; they are interpretative constructions that are useful tools for given purposes'. When transcribing and translating, not all utterances were recorded, but all important and relevant comments to the discussion were noted. To determine what are the important and relevant comments, the recorded discussion was listened to repeatedly to discover what sections were important enough to be transcribed, which sections needed to be summarized, and which sections should be ignored. To ensure the accuracy and consistency of the translation, an independent party was sought to translate a sample of the transcripts back into the Mandarin language. Once the accuracy of the transcripts was established, all transcripts were reviewed and coded accordingly.

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

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

## 4.0 Results

The findings from the focus groups on the participants' perceptions of the teaching and teacher/student relationship in Australia are described in this section.

### 4.1 Teaching

Overall, only a few students reported a positive experience of the teaching, where teaching was viewed as easy-going and at times humorous and enjoyable. It was also noted as engaging, which made it easier for students to remember the subject matter. However, the majority view their experience as less fulfilling, as they generally felt that very few lecturers were passionate in their teaching, skilful and knowledgeable enough to simplify and draw summaries from the voluminous number of presentation slides using practical examples. In general, first year students are most dissatisfied with the teaching experienced in the Australian classrooms when compared to students in their second and final year of studies.

- ***Incomprehensible***

Participants feel that although most of the lecturers/tutors are individuals with high qualifications, they were not schooled in the art of teaching. They claim that they were often unable to understand the teaching, as the lecturers/tutors failed to explain in a clear and understandable way. At times, the lectures were not properly structured, making it difficult for students to follow the lecture presentation, let alone comprehend the material. Some typical responses of first year students in experiencing the teaching is depicted as follows;

*"I did not understand the teaching when first arrived and I actually went to speak to the lecturer and told her that I did not understand a word that she was teaching and asked if she could give me some solutions to the questions. She did not know what to do and said*

*the coordinator in charge did not instruct her to put up the solution on the whiteboard. Then I asked her what I could do as I am an international student and I do not understand her teaching at all. She just smiled and did not say anything. She is a new staff on training, a very young lady... she did not give me any guidance. The second lecture, I continued to attend but still I did not understand her and thereafter I attended some lectures and skipped some...”- (CY1)*

The seemingly negative experience of the teaching by Chinese students continued on into their second year of studies, as they tried to comprehend and reason the differences in their experience of the teaching:

*“The teachers here are very disorientated in their thoughts and teaching in that they skip from one issue to something entirely unrelated and back again to the issues discussed earlier. This is especially hard for us as English language is our second language and hence we might not be able to understand and follow well. I feel that they lack teaching strategies.” – (CY2)*

As demonstrated in the quotations below, students in their final year continued to view the teaching as below their expectation and were disappointed that although most of the academic staff are well qualified for their role, they failed to play their role well.

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

- **Lack of interest**

In addition, some students were troubled that the lecturers/tutors were not concerned with the drop in attendance in lectures/tutorials as the semester progressed. The students felt strongly that such lecturers/tutors should at least reflect on their own teaching, which the students perceived to be the main cause of the reduction in attendance. As such, the students concluded that such lecturers/tutors were irresponsible in their teaching and such behaviour was regarded as most unacceptable and unfair to them. Some typical observations and experience by Chinese students can be seen below:

*“The tutor would still teach regardless of the number of students, be it one or three. He would continue to do his own teaching in front and not be bothered with the response of students. He would not care why initially there were more students and now only left two... like wise in the lecture I had, it was well attended in the beginning but later there were only ten students attending the lecture. I ended up attending another lecture as well... I feel that the lecturer should reflect and examine his own teaching...” – (CY1)*

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

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

*“Here, students’ existence is not important. Unlike in China, whether you wanted to learn or not, you still need to be physically present in class where attendance is marked...here, students’ presence is not of concern, our learning is not important to the*

*teachers at all. The inability to have my presence felt is an adjustment for me, the teachers do not care.” – (CY2)*

As the students progressed through their degree, they continued to perceive that the teaching staff were not interested in teaching:

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

- ***Delivery skills***

Some students pointed out that there were only very few good or respectable quality teachers. Good teachers were identified as those who deliver with passion, clear explanations and illustrations and who ensure that students understand the teaching by allowing time for questions. Poor teaching styles were seen as those who were irresponsible in their teaching; they would go through the motions in an uninterested manner. Such practice also included reading out word for word from the power point slides, providing little or no explanation to students and lack of clarity in their delivery (heavy accent and/or fast in pace, monotone). It is found that students were dismayed with the way tutorials were conducted and felt de-motivated and discouraged to attend. They argued that some tutors were not knowledgeable, competent and/or responsible in their teaching. They find their previous experience of the teaching in China more fulfilling, as the Chinese teachers were perceived to be better prepared for classes compared to the teachers in Australia. This was evidenced by teachers who merely reproduced the exact solutions from the solutions handout, without providing additional insights or explanation, or guide those who simply ‘lost their way’ during their teaching. Quotations from first and second year students are as below:

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

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

*“There is no compare between the teachers here with those in China, I feel that the teachers in China are more knowledgeable in the way they teach and approach the questions. The teachers here often do not prepare well for classes.” – (CY2)*

It seems that the feeling of disappointment and frustration does not only apply to the teaching in tutorials. The Chinese students are equally dissatisfied with the teaching in lectures. Below is a typical example of an arguably bad teaching experience by a first year student.

*“I don’t feel I’ve benefited from the teaching here... some lecturers would just read from the power point slides word for word and sentence for sentence... that way, I could read it by myself. Therefore, I feel that the teaching is rather odd and unacceptable... at times when I ask the lecturer ‘why did you get this answer? the reply came ‘the solutions indicated so’. The response by the lecturer made me feel stupid. Some lecturers might be*



*knowledgeable but they are not good teachers as they do not know how to explain to students.”- (CY1)*

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

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

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

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

- **Beyond the classroom**

Further, the refusal or reluctance of some tutors in staying behind after class to answer queries may result in students being less enthusiastic to approach their lecturers/tutors for help or clarification. Therefore, in general, students regard the teachers in China as more positive in their attitude than those in Australia. The former were more willing to spend time with students to ensure understanding, while the latter have little time to spare. Below are some common complaints from the Chinese students.

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

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

- **Attitude**

Some students felt strongly that many lecturers/tutors have attitude problems that adversely affects their teaching, making the delivery monotonous and mechanistic, rather than lively and interesting. The perceived negative attitude or lack of interest in their own teaching was manifested through their ineffective delivery of the materials. In addition, it was unanimously felt that the lecturers do not

provide direct answers to students when approached. Instead, students were often redirected or expected to look for the answers themselves. Some lecturers were seen as not willing to entertain students who have queries and hence referred them to their tutors and vice versa.

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

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

- **English language**

Further, some students commented that if not for their difficulties with the English language, they might have had a better perception and experience of the classroom where the teaching may be more enjoyable, easily understood, digested and accepted. Some students expressed that they hardly understand the teaching when they first came and they still have difficulties understanding everything in class. All of them acknowledge the importance of listening skills and claimed that it is a skill they lack and hence prevented them to fully comprehend the teaching. Some students explained that although they receive the teaching in English, they have to mentally translate it into Mandarin in order to understand and that takes time. Therefore, if the teachers are not sensitive enough to speak clearly and slowly, the students would be much challenged in their learning. Below are some comments from students in their first, second and final year of studies.

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

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

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

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

Despite the fact that some students find the teaching difficult to understand, they do not seek help from the academic staff for fear that they might not be understood, as some students explain:

*“I seldom ask the lecturers or tutors for help because the manner that we express ourselves might not be understood by them... also even if they answer us... due to our poor listening skills... we might not be able to fully understand what is being said... further, I might take away too much of their time. Our inability to speak clearly would annoy them especially outside teaching hour... they would be very reluctant to talk to us any further after class.” – (CY2)*

*“I’ve tried asking the lecturer when I did not understand, but I still could not comprehend what the lecturer was trying to say and the lecturer could not understand me as well. Therefore, seeking help from friends is a better way to understand the materials or issues. If another student have understood and explain it to you, it would be a lot clearer, especially friends from Malaysia or Singapore who could speak both English and Mandarin.” – (CY2)*

#### **4.2 Teacher/Student Relationship**

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

*“I feel that generally they are pretty friendly, even if I’m late to lectures/tutorials, they would still remain friendly and say hello or hi to me, unlike in China, where students would be punished for being late.” - (CY1)*

*“I feel that whether they are willing to help you or not, they would still be polite. Even if they refused to answer your questions, they do it politely.” - (CY3)*

Given the limited contact students have with their lecturers/tutors, most were not in the position to provide further comments. Such findings are contrary to the common practice of Chinese who are known for their strength in developing contacts, relationships or “guanxi”. Further, given that their previous educational background promotes heavy reliance on teachers, it is only to be expected that there would be at least some form of relationship with their lecturers/tutors. Interestingly, this was not the case and some students even pointed out that they do not even know the names of their lecturers/tutors.

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

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

*“I have no relationship with the lecturers... it is like... I recognise the lecturer but he does not recognise me.” – (CY2)*

According to the students, there are some likely reasons why they do not have much contact with the lecturers/tutors, despite their strong culture in building student-teacher relationships. Some of the

possible reasons include limited contact with the teaching staff, lecture size, English language and cultural barriers.

- **Limited contact time**

According to the students, the teaching staff were only available to them during appointed consultation times, unlike in China where students are able to meet with their teachers anytime they desire without the necessity to make an appointment. Students found it most inconvenient and too formal in making an appointment, as it is not part of their culture to do so. Arguably, the academic staff are rather preoccupied with other commitments and hence have little time to spare in making the connection with the students. As evidenced, although disappointed with the current situation, most Chinese students actually would like to make friends or develop a relationship with their teachers.

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

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

Further, by comparison, the class time in Australia is much shorter than in China; students would only meet their lecturer/tutor once or twice a week for not more than three hours. Moreover, most lecturers/tutors would rush off to the next class, leaving no opportunity for students to approach them for help when needed. Students from Mainland China find this uneasy to accept, as they have had the experience in China of seeking help from their teacher by asking questions at the end of the class, when they could more easily approach the teacher personally, rather than during the class in front of other students. The inability to meet the lecturers/tutors, coupled with the perceived unwillingness of lecturers/tutors to spend time with the student, inadvertently hindered development of a lecturer/student relationship. Therefore, it is not surprising that most students do not know the names of their lecturers/tutors.

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

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

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

Below is one of the many negative experiences that students have with their lecturers/tutors, which left them confused and ultimately lead to a conclusion that the teaching staff are not as friendly or

helpful as they seemed. As a student explained, her encounter with a tutor who seemed unwilling to assist her after class put her off approaching that tutor thereafter.

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

- **Lecture size**

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

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

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

- **Barrier to communication**

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

*“If there is no barrier in language where I could speak fluently just like the local students, I’m confident I could be like the local students who make friends with the teachers. I would initiate more.”- (CY1)*

*“Even if we wanted to say a lot, we have difficulties expressing ourselves unlike the local students who are able to communicate better with the lecturers/tutors.” – (CY2)*

*“Here, you just need to take care of yourself, no one is going to be concern about your study for you... maybe because we are international students, maybe the local Australian students would have a better relationship with the teachers via email etc...”*

*but at least that (relationship with teachers) does not happen with us. As international students maybe our English language is not as good and hence, we are not connected to the teachers.” – (CY2)*

- **Cultural issues**

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

*“...students here need to initiate and only that way the teachers would be aware of your existence. In China, it is the direct opposite where the teachers would initiate to talk to you...” – (CY1)*

*“I find that the teachers here would respond to you if you ask them questions, if you have no questions or queries they would never talk to you...” – (CY2)*

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

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

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

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

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

*“...in Management Accounting, I had a question and hence I approached the tutor to clarify. He answered sarcastically and I was anxious as he did not answer me then he asked the whole class if any students found it difficult with the question. He then asked me if I know the meaning of KISS, I answered that in the past I was told by a teacher*

*that KISS means Keep It Simple. He then humiliated me by saying ‘No, that is not correct, it means Keep It Simple Stupid!’ At that time I was really angry and upset as to why the tutor could say such a nasty thing. Thereafter, I basically self studied that subject. I hated him and hence, never ever approached him again since that tutorial.”- (CY1)*

The above illustration of the tutor’s response can have a significant and direct impact on the way students learn. In general, Chinese students by their very nature and cultural background would not normally participate in class, let alone seek clarification. Therefore, in the above situation, students’ courage and attempts to go outside their comfort zone were somewhat mishandled, due to the apparent cultural ignorance of the tutor and consequently jeopardising a possible relationship. The insensitive response of lecturers/tutors can complicate matters and/or destroy students’ confidence and hence affect their learning.

Further, coming from a homogenous society with a singular dominant culture, inevitably presents another layer of challenge for the Chinese students in embracing a different culture and extending friendship beyond their own culture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 4.3 Students' response

- *Teaching*

The Chinese students in this study asserted that they respond by studying on their own and discussing among their peers when they have failed to understand in class. They would work hard when exams approach, especially when they have not kept abreast during the semester and they often do not seek help from the lecturers/tutors, due to their less positive experience and perceptions of them. As anticipated, first year students had the greatest difficulties in coping and adjusting when compared to students in their second and final year of studies. Nevertheless, most students were quick to adapt and by the time they reach their final year of studies, they are able to cope well and become more independent and responsible for their own learning. Below are some examples of how Chinese students (in year one to final year of studies) managed their learning in response to their experiences of the teaching in Australia, knowing that their previous manner of relying solely on their teachers is no longer applicable in the Australian context.

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

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

*“The emphasis here is on self management, besides managing your homework, assignment and time; you need to take responsible of your own study as the teacher would not manage any of that for you. Prior to lectures and tutorials, I would go over the notes and attempt all tutorial questions prior to attending. I would also obtain the tutorial solutions and make comparison with my own answers. For exams, I would read as much as I can and try to remember as much as I possibly can.” – (CY3)*

As demonstrated above, when the Chinese students progress in their degree, they learned to expect less from the lecturers and rely more on their own coping skills. The view and adaptation of second year students is strongly supported by final year students. Final year students are more confident and coping a lot better in their learning when compared to first year students.

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

As mentioned, there is a difference in response when comparing the experience of second and final year students (as the above-mentioned), with students in their first year of study. Being in a foreign country for the very first time, students in their first year were not used to the culture and expectations in Australian universities and they seemed lost, not knowing what to expect.

*“...When I first came, I was lost, didn't know what to do especially when I could not understand in class. I had a lot to worry about and adapt to, although adaptation was not an issues but still as international students, we needed time to make that change. We*



*were great followers of our teachers in China and all of a sudden, we need to be our own leaders in our studies... in this final year, I find that I'm fine, I've got used to things.”- (CY3)*

Over the years, as the Chinese students become more confident in their learning, a minority of the students begin to adjust their views in valuing their classroom experience. They started to find lectures and tutorials making more sense, enjoyable and value-adding, compared to their earlier experience. They view the teaching somewhat less negatively; they now see the teaching in a slightly different light; and they regard the teaching more relevant and useful to their future. In addition, the students gradually recognise that they cannot rely on the lecturer/tutor and unanimously felt that the lecturer/tutor would also discourage students to depend or rely on them. In addition, they learn that the teaching staff would not spoon feed them, nor show much concern if they failed to take responsibility for their learning. Eventually, some students become more self-conscious and viewed their learning environment more positively, knowing that ultimately they themselves have the full responsibility for their learning, regardless of the situation. They felt strongly that such an arrangement is part of the training provided by Australian universities to help students become independent learners. Attending lectures gives students a general overview of the issues/topics etc but they have to spend time to understand and digest the material and learn the details on their own by looking up different sources. This is consistent with the work of Lee and Lodewijks (1995), which concluded that students who did enjoy their experience were those in final year, as they were more ready to change their learning approaches than students in their initial years. Below are some examples from students who started to appreciate the class room experience in Australia.

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

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

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

- **Teacher/student relationship**

Similar to the abovementioned coping strategies adopted by the Chinese students as the result of their perceptions of the teaching, they seem to develop less reliance on the teachers as well, especially when they perceive that the teachers are not concerned about them. Below are some typical examples from students in their first to final year of studies.

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

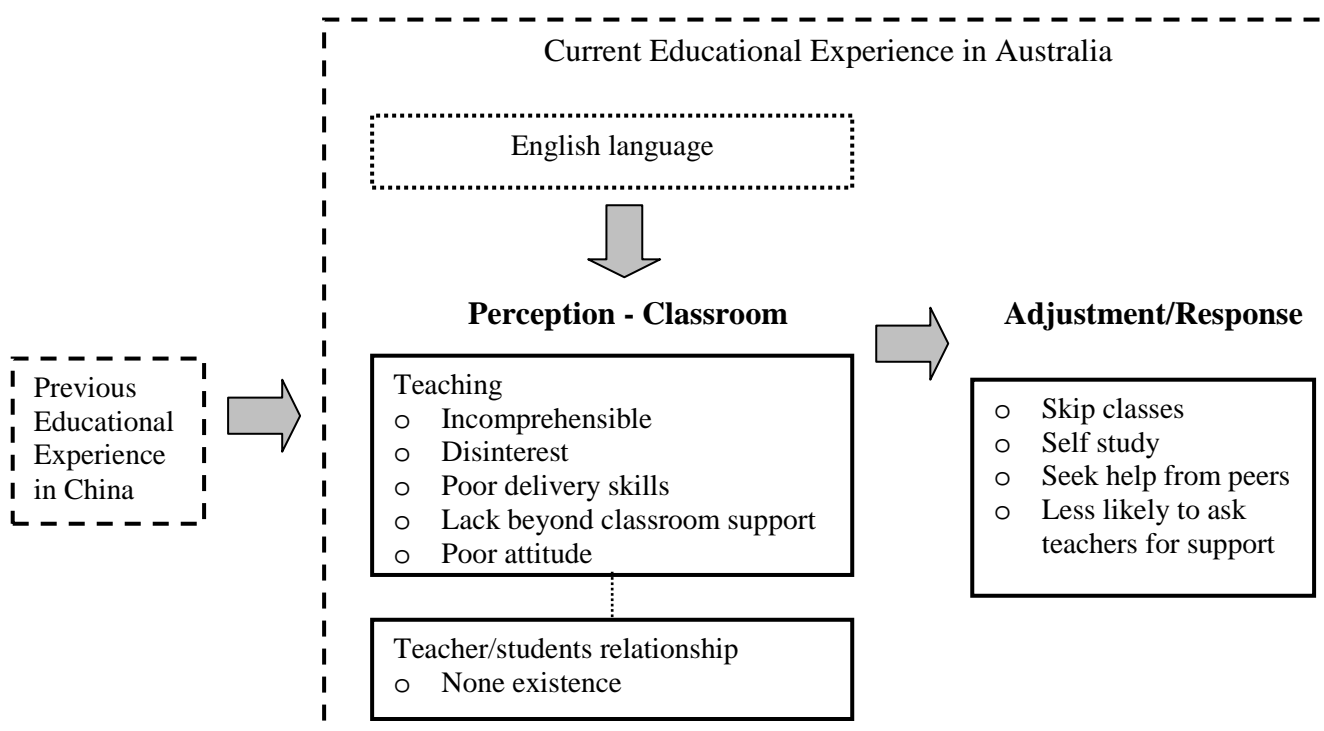
*“You can’t rely on the teachers here... you have to be responsible for your own learning. Although the teachers may be very professional, that has nothing to do with you personally.” – (CY3)*

As reflected in the quotation above, by the time students reached their final year of studies in Australia, they seem to have adjusted well and be more responsible in their learning.

## 5.0 Discussion

As illustrated in Ramsden’s (1992,2003) model of student learning in context, one’s previous educational experience does have an impact on one’s learning. In this study, the findings reveal that besides previous educational experience, students’ proficiencies in language (in this case, the Chinese students’ listening and speaking skills in English), can also influence their perceptions and learning experience. The summary of findings is shown in figure 5.1. Discussion of the classroom perception of both teaching and teacher/student relationship and the effect it has on students’ learning are presented in sections 5.1 and 5.2 below.

**Figure 5.1**



### 5.1 Teaching

Drawing from the schooling experience in China, where the teaching appeared to be highly structured, teachers were clear and detailed in their explanations, extremely responsible, persistently and meticulously guiding the participants in their studies, the perceptions of the teaching in Australia, by comparison, seem less satisfying. There is a mismatch of students’ expectations of the teaching, especially when they first arrived. They felt the learning responsibilities rest on the students themselves to read up and learn if they desire to acquire a deeper understanding or knowledge of the subject matter. The only positive assessments of the teaching were concerning the practical, relevant and industry-related aspects of the subject matter, which emphasise on building knowledge instead of passing exams. Other than that, most participants across all year levels see the teaching in Australia as being poor in quality and the lectures in particular were not value-adding. According to

Ferreira and Santoso (2008), accounting students generally bring with them some negative perceptions of the subjects, particularly in regard to the nature and role of an accountant. As evident in the findings, the overall teaching quality is seen to be below expectations, as explanations were unclear and the academic staff are generally perceived as irresponsible, due to a perceived disinterest displayed in their teaching, as well as in the students.

It is also perceived that some lecturers/tutors are just not committed in their teaching, providing little support to students and are ineffective in their delivery. Teaching effectiveness, from the students' perspective, is the ability of teachers to be useful, helpful and valuable in providing lasting intellectual learning via identified personal characteristics and instructional arrangements (Jahangiri and Mucciolo, 2008). Such negative perceptions of the classroom experience provide a likely reason for students' absenteeism. Numerous studies have attempted to offer possible explanations to students' absence in class (Longhurst, 1999; Paisey and Paisey, 2004; Woodfield et al., 2006; Massingham and Herrington, 2006; Moore et al., 2008). According to the literature, these explanations range from more 'valid' reasons to less 'valid' reasons. As the researchers clarified, more 'valid' reasons include sickness and work commitments, while sleeping late is categorised as a less 'valid' reason. In this paper, students' inability to comprehend the teaching and the arguably uncommitted and disinterest on the part of the teachers, are seen as reasons why the Chinese students decide to skip classes.

Such a low assessment of the teaching in Australia is also partially attributed to the participants' inability to understand the teaching as a result of their English proficiency, as depicted in Figure 5.1. The work by Grayson (2007) also reflects this finding, where the researcher explains that Asian students from a non-English speaking background are generally less able in comprehending what was going on in the classroom. Despite students' inability to understand the teaching, they are less likely to voice their opinions or seek support, especially during class. This is due to the influence of Confucian values that emphasise respect and harmony, where Chinese students are careful not to offend the lecturers/tutor (Chan, 1999; Kirkbride and Tang, 1992). Most students coped by studying on their own and seeking help from their peers instead of the teachers.

As noted by Ballard (1987), non English speaking background students often come from a traditional educational system that does not prepare them for Australian university teaching and learning approaches. Similar issues were highlighted by Li (2004) when assessing the perceptions of Asian international students studying English in New Zealand. It was noted that the problem emerges when students make a comparison with their home education, what they expected in the classroom and how they expected the teachers to deliver. Western universities generally expect students to engage in independent learning. By the time the Chinese students in the current study entered into their second year of studies, they would have developed their own coping strategies. Their experience of the classroom also further reinforced their perceptions that they have to be responsible for their own learning. Eventually, a few students become more self-aware and viewed the teaching more positively, knowing that ultimately they themselves have the full responsibility for their learning, regardless of the situation. They attempted to reason that the teaching is relevant and useful to their future and such an arrangement is part of the training provided by Australian universities to help students become independent learners.

In this study, students' reminiscence of their past experience coupled with unfamiliarity and unawareness of the teaching and learning practices in Australia, is an example of the differences which leads to a misunderstanding of the teaching objectives in developing certain skills in students (such as independence in seeking out answers or taking up the responsibility to learn). For example, the participants interpret the teaching as unhelpful when the academic staff refused to stay back to address students' queries, or when they fail to ensure students have understood their delivery. Such differences and mismatches in expectations, and the misunderstanding on the part of the participants in this study, further adds to the confusion and disappointment of the teaching experienced.

Nonetheless, as indicated across all year levels, an alarm is raised concerning the quality of teaching. This troubling phenomenon needs urgent attention, especially as universities are in the pursuit of academic excellence. One of the possible reasons for the bad teaching as perceived by the participants in this study, is the recent very strong emphasis on research by academic staff to the extent of downplaying the teaching quality by universities. The work of Watty (2006) suggests that the quality in accounting education has decreased over the years. The notion of ‘publish or perish’ has unknowingly forced academic staff to focus predominately on publication of research articles, which has become a common key performance indicator in staff annual performance reviews and used as a criteria for promotion. There should be a balance in emphasis; research is paramount and so is teaching. Moreover, to maintain good teaching quality or even improve the situation, attention needs to be taken in the selection of full time academic staff. It is crucial that all academics have both the experience and knowledge in the subjects they teach, besides having the skills to teach.

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

## **5.2 Teacher/student relationship**

Although, on face value, most teaching staff in Australia may seem friendly as they are polite and smile at the students, interaction between the teaching staff and the students is lacking and so is the teacher/student relationship. The experience of the Chinese students seems to suggest that there is a lack of support from academic staff and the relationship the students have with their lecturer or tutor (if any) is much more distant, where students have to be proactive in seeking out help. This supports the findings by Christie *et al.*, (2008) on college students’ experiences in university life. It is further reiterated in the study by Krause *et al* (2005, p. v) ‘...only half of respondents agree that staff are usually available to discuss their work and there remain a substantial number who do not perceive staff to be accessible. A little less than one-third of students feel that teaching staff take an interest in their students’ progress and give helpful feedback.’

As demonstrated in the findings, most Chinese students don’t even know the names of their lecturers or tutors and, disappointingly, it is perceived that the lecturers and tutors were not interested to get to know the students and hence failed to initiate the communication expected and yearned for by the students. This is contrary to the practice and experience of Chinese students in their home country. In fact, the findings reveal that Chinese students have a very close relationship with their teachers in China. The teachers are highly regarded and respected by students, as they are very responsible and cared for greatly for their students, like a parent towards a child (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Overwhelmed by the attention and concern of their teachers, the Chinese students would reciprocate by putting in extra effort in their studies in order to obtain good grades as a form of gratitude towards the teachers. Bringing with them such a unique experience of the relationship students have with their teachers in China, they felt neglected and ignored by the Australian educators. This mismatch in expectations has become a barrier to the students in developing communication with their Australian lecturers/tutors. Further, as Confucian values emphasise modesty (Kirkbride and Tang, 1992), Chinese students generally are less likely to ask for support, even when they don’t understand certain concepts (Chan, 1999).

The participants disappointingly acknowledge that the relationship with their lecturers/tutors in Australia is close to nil. Some of the reasons for such mismatch include the following;

- **Limited contact time** - the academics are seen to have little time to spare or, at times, are unwilling to spend time with the participants in this study. Coming from a background where

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

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

- ***Size of lectures*** – Huge lecture halls can also contribute to the difficulties Mainland Chinese students face in clarifying uncertainties and hence reduce the opportunities for teacher/student contact. The ‘face’ issue often prevents the students, especially those from a non-English speaking background, from asking questions in class (Hellsten and Prescott, 2004), let alone in a lecture. Therefore, it would help if lectures are replaced with smaller classes or seminars with a size of no more than 40 students. The size of approximately 40 students in a class is commonly experienced by students from non-English speaking backgrounds such as the Chinese (Turner and Acker, 2002). Although this might seem impractical and not cost effective for universities, it is a measure that could improve teaching and learning quality for all students.
- ***Barriers to Communication*** – this is one of the key areas that prevent the development of teacher-student relationships, which the participants longed for. Generally, Chinese students are less confident in approaching the lecturers/tutors due to their English level; they often have difficulties expressing themselves clearly. One of the reasons is due to the fear of loss of face
- ***Cultural differences*** – to show respect in the Chinese collectivist culture (Hofstede, 2001), one will only speak when one is spoken or invited to. This is especially the case when the other party is higher in the social hierarchy than oneself, such as a teacher. This is in contrast to the Western culture of individualism (Jackson *et al.*, 2006a), which centres on equal rights and an individual’s rights, where students are not only encouraged but expected to challenge the teachers and speak their minds uninvited and liberally. Without such awareness, it is difficult for individuals from a different culture to understand each other and develop a relationship and this is the case with the participants in this study. Further, in the Chinese tradition, teachers are often portrayed as a model for students to emulate and hence respect and thus, the behaviour, attitude and actions of the teachers have to hold up to such an expectation. This is far from the case in the Western environment, which can often lead to confusion and hindrance to a possible teacher/students relationship. To bridge the cultural gap, creating awareness is therefore inevitable and it is essential for educational institutions to understand their students who are from a different culture and hold different cultural values from their own. One suggestion is to organise international days where individuals (both academics and students) are able to interact and present their own culture to others.

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

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

## **6.0 Conclusion**

The knowledge of how Chinese students perceive the teaching is of paramount importance in an attempt to further understand how they cope in a foreign land with a foreign language. This paper contributes to the accounting education literature by highlighting the issues surrounding overall teaching quality in undergraduate accounting studies as perceived by Mainland Chinese students. The study provides evidence of the arguably ineffective teaching quality as perceived by the students and the contributing factor, namely, lack of English proficiency, which has resulted in the less than satisfactory educational experience Mainland Chinese students have in Australia. More urgently, the perceived inferior teaching style is a wake up call to academics that teaching quality must not be compromised in exchange for research excellence. As with any study of this nature, there are a number of limitations. Firstly, this study is cross-sectional, giving only a snap shot view of students' perceptions and the influence it has on their learning. A longitudinal study could certainly assist to confirm the findings of the study. Secondly, there is a possibility of the loss of meaning in translation of focus group data from Mandarin to English. However, the translation by the researcher was checked for accuracy and consistency by a second translator, an independent party, who translated a sample of the transcripts back into the Mandarin language. Further, as the focus group discussions with the students were conducted in their mother tongue, the Mandarin language, this increases the reliability and quality of the data provided by the students. An area for future research is to investigate on students' intention of tertiary education in Australia, as it is possible that they are here purely for permanent residency status via an accounting degree. If that is the case, the students' learning attitude and behaviour could be different from what was assumed of them, namely, to acquire knowledge and be equipped in order to be more employable in the future.

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