

ECDE7020 Research Proposal

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Start Date	22nd April.2024	End Date	According to research needs

PhD by Research	PhD Practice Based	PhD by Published Works	Professional Doctorate (including DBA, DProf, Ed D)	MPhil by Research	MPhil Practice Based
☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐
MA by Research	MSc by Research	MRes			
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Proposed Research Question and sub-questions (if appropriate):

Main Research Question:

How Effective Are Pre-sessional Programs (PSP) in Higher Education to Chinese International Students?

Sub-questions:

1. What factors (e.g., teaching) do Chinese international students perceive to be the impact of the PSP (in U diversity of Southampton) on their academic success?
2. What could OTHER similar programs (e.g., Academic Chinese Pre-Sessional Programs) learn from the successful Program of PSPs in the UK?

Background & Context (approx. 500 words)

A growing number of young international learners opt to seek academic advancement within the diverse environments and traditions of overseas education, distinct from their countries of origin, as reported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The UK attracts 14% of these globally mobile students (Packer, 2022), offering various educational programs to cater to their needs. Pearson (2020) indicates UK higher education institutions have extensively implemented pre-sessional programs (PSPs) that concentrate on scholarly purposes, which works effectively to strengthen their appeal in the highly competitive global market for individuals, particularly Chinese international students, who do not fulfill the standard English language proficiency criteria for admission.

Historical context:

The United Kingdom has long held a significant position on the world stage in the realm of international higher education trade, both as a receiver and provider (Williams, 1987). The

effectiveness of PSPs largely depends on their capacity to fulfill both functions, though a smaller portion is designed solely for acculturation purposes for students who are already proficient in the PSPs typically extend over a period of 4 to 12 weeks, encompassing a blend of concentrated in-class teaching and self-directed learning (McGrath & Bailey, 2009).

Social context:

Several significant challenges can impact the effectiveness of PSPs courses for certain learners. Firstly, since universities serve as visa sponsors for non-EU international students throughout their degree programs, some students may develop an expectation of automatic course progression. This perception is further reinforced by promotional materials that highlight high success rates in PSPs. Secondly, intensive PSPs courses are typically conducted during the summer, a period when domestic students are largely absent from campus. As a result, the learning environment does not fully reflect the typical UK university experience (Copland & Garton, 2011).

Cultural context:

It has been suggested that some PSP students show some resistance to accepting a new academic identity (McGrath & Bailey, 2009). For these students, maintaining a sense of belonging to a circle of friends in their mother tongue (L1) is considered more important than using English inside and outside the classroom (Demirkan-Jones, 2006).

Bailey, K. M (2006) indicates that evaluating a teaching program is a multi-faceted process that involves assessing various dimensions of instructional effectiveness, curriculum design, student progress, and overall pedagogical quality of PSP. Literature reviews show, **Current understanding of foundation programme efficacy remains limited, with scarce empirical evidence regarding international student progression rates, academic achievement thresholds, or longitudinal outcomes across UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Brown, 1995; Bailey, 2006).**

Particularly absent are systematic analyses correlating PSP completion with subsequent degree performance – a critical gap given the sector's financial and reputational dependencies (Seviour, 2015).

More critically, limited research has explicitly investigated the correlation between finishing PSP and ultimate academic performance. Considering the substantial academic and monetary investments required for PSP (Seviour, 2015), the lack of relevant data is concerning. Thorpe et al. (2017) even questions the consensus validity of PSP in assisting students to reach the level of well-prepared language learners.

Aims & Objectives (approx. 250-500 words)

Based on the literature review, I developed the following inclusion and exclusion criteria to address PSP for my research:

First, PSP was broadly defined as one of the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program whose core goal was to equip L2 learners with academic literacy to navigate complex discourse and succeed in higher education (Lee & Subtirelu, 2015). Therefore, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs that focus only on a single skill (e.g., writing) were ruled out.

Second, the included studies needed to look at programs offered by HEIs for prospective students who had been granted conditional offers, so English language development programmes offered by private language schools were excluded.

Third, only studies of intensive EAP programs that were full-time, of a fixed duration and finished immediately before the start of the degree program were included except these following 2 types of studies:

1. Students were required to pass a credit or non-credit EAP program to progress to or graduate from a university (e.g., Clark & Ishida, 2005).
2. Students were required to complete EAP courses concurrently with their major program of study (e.g., Storch & Tapper, 2009).

My research needs to respond to the central question posed by the social practice school of higher education assessment - 'Where does the urgency of assessment come from?' (Saunders, Trowler, & Bamber, 2001, p. 204). **There is a serious lack of data on the scale and impact of PSP in the UK, especially:**

1. The status of learners who have met course requirements and successfully progressed to degree programs.
2. Evaluations of PSP by learners who have completed PSP and ultimately finished their degree programmes.

The aim of my research is to examine the effectiveness of PSPs in preparing international students for the academic requirements of UK universities by **evaluating their curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, student support, outcomes, and value**. The core objective is to identify how PSPs bridge the language and academic skills gap and enhance students' resilience to higher education (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014).

First, the **curriculum design** is assessed for the development of academic English (writing, reading, listening, and speaking) and critical thinking. These skills are in line with university academic norms and help students to engage effectively in academic activities and construct arguments (Hyland, 2016).

Second, teaching methods are analysed, particularly interactive teaching that simulates authentic academic scenarios (e.g., seminars, group tasks) versus **blended teaching** (a combination of online and offline), the latter of which can meet diverse learning needs (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Third, program outcomes are measured through **language proficiency improvement** (e.g., IELTS score progress), increased confidence in academic tasks, and success in subsequent degree programs, reflecting the contribution of PSPs to academic resilience (Briggs et al., 2012).

Finally, the value proposition of PSPs is examined, focusing on their role in supporting students with substandard language scores and their effectiveness in reducing academic culture shock. Through customised language and culture training, PSPs ensure that students both meet entry criteria and adapt to the **new teaching framework** (Lochtman & Kappel, 2008).

Proposed Plan of Work

Planned development	Target date for completion
Reading and writing of introduction and literature review	Update the latest literature before the last day to submit the final paper
Reading and writing of methodology chapter:	June 2025 - November 2025
-Finalise Documentation: Participant Information Consent Forms	
-Complete Data Gathering Instrument: -Questionnaire Design -Interview Schedule -Semi-structured Interview Questions	
Piloting research tools	
Collecting data	
Analysing data	November 2025 or earlier-November 2027 (Possibility of updating data or re-collecting analyses cannot be ruled out)
Cleaning Data (for both questionnaire & interview data)	
Analysis (for questionnaire data)	
Analysis (for interview data)	
Triangulation	
Complete Data Analysis	
Writing up of result	November 2027- December 2027
Writing conclusions	December 2027

Proposed Methodology (approx. 500 words)

Basturkmen and Lewis (2002) suggest that, from a critical and emancipatory epistemological standpoint, PSP should incorporate student feedback mechanisms to dynamically adjust the relevant teaching and learning to ensure that it meets students' needs and expectations. So quantitative research methods such as questionnaires and other qualitative research methods are both helpful in the evaluation of PSP frame. Basturkmen & Lewis (2002)'s study also indicates academic experiences of key stakeholders in PSP constitute a valid and important source of data for assessing the effectiveness of language courses. Pearson (2020) indicates researchers often use a variety of data collection tools or measures of academic success when assessing the effectiveness of PSPs by mixed method research (MMR).

Green (2000) conducted a mixed methodology study that tracked the foundation course performance. The researchers integrated various data sources, such as PSP evaluation outcomes, surveys conducted with both educators and learners, interviews with faculty members, and final academic performance, to assess the reliability of foundation course assessments in predicting future success. Then Green's (2007) study underscores integrated longitudinal-cross-sectional designs in evaluating PSPs. Longitudinal tracking of students from PSP completion into degree courses reveals sustained challenges (e.g., discipline-specific language gaps), while cross-sectional comparisons across cohorts identify contextual variables (e.g., curriculum updates). This dual approach strengthens validity through triangulation, offering evidence for PSP optimization and policy reform. Such methodologies prioritize holistic understanding over isolated metrics, aligning with UK educational research norms.

Since foundation courses need to demonstrate their value in terms of quality assurance to the academic community of non-EAP experts in an easily measurable way, the primary method for studying the effectiveness of foundation courses is quantitative research (Blaj-Ward, 2014). In my research, I will conduct a qualitative analysis of students' learning experience after completing the PSP and entering the degree program for six months before participating in the PSP, and, use

a follow-up study to compare the assessment of PSP and degree programs through questionnaire survey and simple statistical analysis. Based on the findings, conclusions can be drawn regarding the enhancement of students' linguistic abilities and academic understanding, which serve as key indicators for evaluating the success of pre-sessional programs.

While examples of research using multiple tools do exist in the literature (e.g., Atherton, 2006; Martala, 2006), my research will also focus on the graduate population, as existing research shows that their performance on the foundation course path seems to be less ideal than that of undergraduates. By integrating both numerical and descriptive data, a fuller picture of the factors that influence PSP success can be revealed, providing deeper insights into course design and evaluation.

Reeves et al. (2013) provides a methodology to my research with immersive observation and contextual data analysis, which give implications **on a case analysis of Evaluating the Effectiveness of a PSP in University of Southampton for Chinese International Students**

PSP in University of Southampton aimed to prepare non-native English-speaking especially Chinese international students for UK higher education. They have been adopted widely to attract international students, though their effectiveness is debated. (Packer, 2022) My empirical research is to critically evaluate the effectiveness of PSPs via factors such as Language Proficiency Gains and Academic Performance etc.

Data Collection and Analysis

Observation: in my research, classroom interactions between students and teachers, as well as informal learning environments, are audio-recorded and partly video-recorded to understand their participation, engagement, and adaptation strategies.

Semi-structured Interviews: By immersing in PSPs and analyzing data contextually, factors like curriculum relevance and teaching effectiveness align with the focus on program outcomes and value (Reeves et al., 2013), via the semi-structured interviews with Chinese international students during

Stage 1. Midway through the PSP.

Stage 2. At the end of the PSP.

Stage 3. Six months after PSP students have entered their degree programs in the University of Southampton (for post-PSP research).

Stage 4. After degree programs when they have been back to China or still abroad (for long term effects).

Interviews will provide insights and investigate the relationship or alignment between PSP outcomes and subsequent academic performance in degree courses.

Document Analysis: Course materials, study guides, and assessment criteria are examined to contextualize student experiences within the program's structure.

Other: Descriptive Analysis for questionnaire data etc.

Sampling Strategy

Piloting research tools: after ethnical approval and prior to conducting a formal study using the research methodology.

Purposive Sampling: Reeves et al. (2013) note that purposive sampling needs to ‘balance research objectives with practical operational constraints’ (Reeves et al. ,2013, p. 139). Chinese international students are selected as the target group to ensure the study’s relevance. To correspond with the subsequent China study, UK students who are participating in relevant programs in China will also be selected for the sustainability of further research.

Snowball Sampling: Initial participants recommend other Chinese students who are suitable for this study and share similar experiences, providing a broader perspective.

In summary, through the MMR and the above research methods, by philosophical derivation from the individual case to the general, the factors can be explored, which provides a different perspective for analyzing the comprehensive effectiveness of PSP, so that the PSP can better serve the students' academic success, and then provide a reference for other similar program (e.g., Academic Chinese Pre-academic Chinese Program).

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AI Statement

RESEARCH	For this assessment, you can use Generative AI to support you in research, including searching for bibliography, using tools to summarise, compare and interrogate materials.	Yes ☐ No ☒
STRUCTURE	For this assessment, you can use Generative AI to support you in structuring your submission, including creating a draft argument structure, identifying parts and headings, etc.	Yes ☐ No ☒
PROOFREADING	For this assessment, you can use Generative AI to check your own text/creation for grammatical and syntactical mistakes, including rephrasing of your own work within specific standards.	Yes ☒ No ☐
WRITING	For this assessment, you can use Generative AI to create text for submission.	Yes ☐ No ☒
CREATIVE	For this assessment, you can use Generative AI to create creative materials, such as images.	Yes ☐ No ☒
PROGRAMING	For this assessment, you can use Generative AI to create and check code.	Yes ☐ No ☒
NONE	For this assessment, you are not allowed to use any type of Generative AI support. This includes research support, structure support, writing/proofreading support and creative support.	Yes ☐ No ☒

