



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

**Language Proficiency and Academic
Readiness: A Case Study on the
Effectiveness of Pre-sessional Programmes
at a University in the UK**

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STUDENT NAME: Tao PENG

STUDENT NUMBER: 2411134

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1. Introduction

Universities in Anglophone contexts have increasingly institutionalised intensive pre-sessional programmes (PSPs) to advance learners' capacity for discipline-specific academic discourse in English (Hyland, 2018; Wingate, 2015). The proliferation of such courses is widely interpreted as a strategic response to the commodification of global higher education, enabling institutions to augment their market position by recruiting and linguistically equipping international candidates who require enhanced language socialisation prior to full degree enrolment (Charles, 2018; Green, 2000). This practice is especially embedded in the United Kingdom, where such pathway provisions are not only a common feature of the international student offer but are also closely integrated with broader institutional internationalisation strategies (Allwright & Banerjee, 2015; Pearson, 2020; British Council, 2022). Around 10–15% of international students are reported to need PSPs to satisfy linguistic or academic entry standards (British Council, 2022).

Pearson (2020) highlights that student success frequently hinges on the extent to which these programmes equip them for academic expectations. In a similar vein, Hyland (2006) agrees that addressing such preparatory needs is important for supporting academic progress, ensuring smoother integration, and enhancing overall student satisfaction. PSPs, designed to cultivate both language proficiency and academic readiness, were first prioritised following the 1978 SELMOUS seminar at the University of Manchester, which highlighted their role in enabling students to comprehend lectures, write essays and theses critically (The British Council, 1978). The earliest PSPs at Manchester (1972–1977) exemplified this integrated approach. Since the historical development of PSPs, there have been many representative cases. The rationale for selecting the University of S in the UK as my case study for the PSP investigation stems from both practical and academic considerations. Firstly, my physical presence in the city S in the UK from July to September 2025 facilitates

primary data collection through field research. Secondly, the University of S is recognised as one of the earliest institutions to establish such programmes in the UK (British Council, 2022).

By 2020 many universities, such as University of S, offer online PSPs through Tri-Helix Model of university-industry-government relations (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000), while assessment includes digital examinations and coursework, ensuring academic alignment (Pearson, 2020; University of S, 2021). Notably, compared to pre-pandemic levels and the previous academic year, the current cohort size has experienced a significant decline (British Council, 2024). Specifically, the Director (D1 as shown in the next chapters) of the PSP in university of S indicates the six-week programme now comprises only 630 students in total, with 550 participating online and an 80 attending in-person classes. This sharp reduction in actual student numbers raises substantive questions regarding the programme's operational effectiveness and pedagogical sustainability (D1, personal interview, 2025).

PSPs are thus defined as short-term, intensive English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses which prepare non-native speakers of English for entry to UK higher education by enhancing listening, reading, speaking and writing skills (Hyland, 2016). They are distinct from single-skill English as a Second Language courses (Lea & Street, 1998) or general English provision in private schools, being exclusively offered by Higher Education (HE) to students with conditional offers. PSPs are characterised by full-time delivery, fixed programme cycles, and direct progression to degree study. Conversely, programmes embedding EAP within credit-bearing curricula or alongside disciplinary study are excluded (Storch & Tapper, 2009). This study concerns a PSP during the summer term at the university of S which received more than 6000 international Chinese students each year from 2020 to now (University of S, 2025), some of those students enroll in this programme to lay the groundwork for their forthcoming higher education studies in the UK and to acquire relevant skills. Initially, these students were required to register for the distance learning (online) course, but they now have the

option to choose between the concurrently offered in-person and online courses. According to interviews with T1, who oversees all PSP courses for the summer of 2025, the majority of PSP students were from Asia, with more than 1700 mainland Chinese students forming the predominant group (University of S, 2025; T1, personal interview, 2025).

2.Literature Review

2.1 Philosophical Foundations

As an empirical study, my case study is fundamentally grounded in ontological and epistemological assumptions that determine methodological choices (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). The positivist tradition, rooted in Comte's scientific principles, prioritizes empirical quantification and causal generalizations over qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). Contemporary pragmatism seeks practical solutions through the synergistic application of mixed methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021). Crucially, paradigm selection must align not only with the research questions but also with the ethical commitments I uphold at university, particularly within cross-cultural contexts. Contemporary educational research recognizes the pragmatic paradigm as the optimal approach for exploring the complex linguistic-academic adaptation processes within preparatory curricula (Morgan, 2014), which rejects the false dichotomy between positivism and interpretivism, instead positioning triangulation—the integration of observation, interviews, and questionnaires—as a cognitive strategy for capturing multidimensional realities. Crucially, methodological choices must account for inherent power imbalances in international teacher-student relationships (Villegas, 2021), and triangulation effectively mitigates researcher bias through aggregated validation mechanisms.

2.2 Language Proficiency and Academic Readiness in PSPs

2.2.1 Language Proficiency Development through PSPs

PSPs are designed to help students meet institutional English language entry requirements, typically through intensive instruction lasting from 4 to 16 weeks (Pearson, 2020). The core aim is to raise students' proficiency to a level comparable to direct-entry candidates. Research indicates that most PSP participants do demonstrate improvement, particularly in writing proficiency, though these gains are often modest (Archibald, 2001; Green, 2007; Pearson, 2020).

Among the research of PSP, Liu and Brown (2015), along with Heng (2018), and Hyland (2008), had each contributed significantly to scholarly discussions concerning academic writing development and corrective feedback, with particular emphasis on vocabulary development and discipline-specific literacy. Liu and Brown (2015) carried out a systematic meta-analysis of feedback methodologies, underscoring that their efficacy is closely tied to learners' level of cognitive involvement and the specific educational setting in which feedback is delivered. Heng (2018) directed the research toward lexical acquisition, highlighting notable gaps in the vocabulary knowledge of students in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes, which consequently influences their capacity to interpret and produce academic texts. Hyland (2008) further extended this discourse through an investigation into the rhetorical and discursive characteristics of academic writing, proposing a genre-oriented pedagogy that makes explicit the writing conventions peculiar to different academic disciplines. Corpus-based studies, such as Issitt (2016), observed notable lexical and grammatical development, including increased complexity and academic features in students' writing. However, not all students benefited equally; a portion showed no measurable improvement in key writing traits (Pearson, 2020).

2.2.2 Academic Readiness of PSP Alumni

Despite linguistic gains, academic outcomes for PSP alumni often lag behind those of their direct-entry peers. Quantitative tracking studies reveal that although pass rates for PSPs are high, many students progress into degree programmes with only borderline language skills (Atherton, 2006; Ridley, 2006). This has been linked to extended degree completion times, increased thesis resubmission rates, and in some cases, outright failure.

Ushioda and Harsch (2011) demonstrate through correlational analysis that PSP performance possesses limited predictive validity concerning subsequent academic achievement. Thorpe et al. (2017) demonstrated that PSP alumni underperformed in terms of Grade Point Average (GPA) compared to both native speakers and Chinese international students who entered via standard routes, raising concerns about the sufficiency of these programmes in remedying significant proficiency shortfalls.

2.3 Teachers' and Students' Perceptions on PSP

The effectiveness of PSP in preparing Chinese international students for academic readiness in the UK HE has been widely discussed, with particular emphasis on the perceptions of both students and teachers. Understanding these perspectives is crucial, as perceptions directly influence instructional design, student engagement, and subsequent academic performance (Heng, 2018). Research indicates that Chinese students often enter PSPs with specific linguistic and cultural challenges, such as reluctance in participatory classroom activities and unfamiliarity with critical academic conventions (Lomer & Springerlink, 2017). Therefore, evaluating how students perceive PSP activities—such as group discussions, presentations, and critical writing tasks—provides insight into the programme's alignment with their academic needs and cultural expectations.

From the student perspective, studies show that structured and interactive PSP tasks are generally perceived as beneficial for building academic confidence and language competence. For instance, Heng (2018) found that students valued repeated practice in

oral presentations and peer feedback, which reduced anxiety and improved communicative performance. Similarly, academic writing workshops are frequently highlighted as instrumental in familiarising students with Western rhetorical conventions (Hyland, 2019; Evans & Morrison, 2011).

Teachers' perceptions are equally critical, as they directly shape pedagogical strategies and feedback mechanisms. Directors often report noticeable improvements in students' language proficiency and academic readiness upon completion of PSPs (Basturkmen & Lewis, 2020). However, some express concerns about the transferability of skills to disciplinary contexts, emphasising that language development must be coupled with methodological and critical thinking training (Wingate, 2015). Overall, the congruence or divergence between student and teacher perceptions can illuminate strengths and gaps in PSP curricula, thereby informing more responsive and effective English for Academic Purposes (EAP) provision (Charles, 2015).

2.4 Surface Validity and Underlying Fact

Quantitative studies of the UK PSPs frequently report high pass rates, typically ranging from 84% to 96% (Pearson, 2020). However, these surface-level indicators of success often mask underlying challenges. A significant proportion of students achieve only marginal passes, and between 49% and 54% of PSP alumni subsequently require degree extensions or dissertation resubmissions (Hyland, 2019). Their average degree GPAs also remain consistently lower, by 3 to 7 points, compared to their directly admitted international peers (Thorpe et al., 2017). While PSPs demonstrably improve general writing proficiency—evidenced by gains in lexical complexity (+10%) and nominalisation (+23%)—these skills frequently fail to transfer effectively to discipline-specific contexts (Green, 2007). This discrepancy is further highlighted by a misalignment between student perception and academic reality: although 78% of students acknowledge the programme's value for general academic adaptation, in practice, 47% over-rely on template-based writing and 61% retreat to their first-language social circles during complex cross-cultural discussions (Copland & Garton,

2011). Structural issues within course design contribute to these gaps; for instance, 83% of writing tasks use generic prompts rather than discipline-specific assessments, and mixed-ability grouping leads 23% of students to report an inappropriate learning pace (Dooley, 2010). These validity concerns are compounded by methodological weaknesses in the research itself; 75% of longitudinal studies rely solely on course grades without tracking degree-level performance, and 59% of writing analyses use manual assessment instead of standardised rubrics (Atherton, 2006; Martala, 2009). Furthermore, critical data gaps persist, with only three studies establishing regression models between PSP and subsequent degree grades, and a mere 21% of studies employing international student control groups for comparison (Thorpe et al., 2017; Ushioda & Harsch, 2011).

2.5 Importance of the Study

PSPs represent a key intervention within international higher education, designed to assist international students in navigating the challenges of transitioning to new academic, linguistic and socio-cultural environments. With increasing student mobility worldwide and the accompanying pressure on universities to ensure these students are adequately prepared for degree-level study, PSPs have become increasingly important issues.

Effective PSPs typically incorporate five mutually reinforcing modules focusing on listening, reading, speaking, writing and independent learning. This structure reflects the consensus within the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) regarding multidimensional nature of academic preparation. Within these reading and writing modules, the emphasis on planning, research, task construction, and mastery of citation conventions aligns with the perspective that academic writing constitutes a complex social practice rather than merely a set of technical skills (Lea and Street, 1998). This pedagogical approach moves beyond foundational comprehension and grammar to cultivate critical evaluation skills, representing a transformative shift essential for

success within UK higher education (Wallace and Wray, 2021). Similarly, the Listening and Speaking module trains students to deliver presentations and extract key points from lectures, addressing the often-overlooked receptive and interactive demands of academic settings that are crucial for effective seminar participation and knowledge construction (Alexander, 2020; Lynch, 2019).

Within University S's PSP, a particularly significant component is the core practice requiring students to complete regular "Reflective Weekly Reports" for independent learning via an online platform termed the "e-folder". This is not a simple learning log but a guided, self-critical reflection tool designed to systematically cultivate students' metacognitive abilities. Through writing these reports, students are required to examine their learning processes, evaluate the effectiveness of strategies, identify knowledge gaps, and plan adjustments. This practice of conscious, self-critical reflection serves as a key mechanism for propelling students from passive knowledge acquisition towards active control of their learning, development of personal goals, and autonomous decision-making regarding their studies (Cotterall, 2008; Zimmerman, 2002). The programme's overall delivery model (integrating live sessions, tutorials, group interactions, etc.) provides "e-folder" for the "Reflective Weekly Report", thereby powerfully cultivating this core autonomy while offering essential structured support (Hockly and Clandfield, 2021).

As demonstrated by the structure of S University's PSP, these programmes constitute not merely remedial language training but a comprehensive process of academic socialisation. their primary objective is to foster students' understanding of specific academic demands across core skills, thereby positioning the PSP as a bridge connecting general language proficiency with the specialised discourses of academic disciplines.

The overarching significance of PSPs lies in their dual focus on short-term gains and long-term impacts, which aligns with my **Research Objectives**. Short-term outcomes,

as **Objective 1**, such as alignment with IELTS/CEFR benchmarks and the acquisition of discrete academic skills (e.g., critical writing), serve as direct indicators of effectiveness (Seviour, 2015; Pearson, 2020). However, as **Objective 2**, the true measure of PSP value lies in its long-term correlation with sustained academic performance, including degree grades and dissertation success (Thorpe et al., 2017; Wingate, 2015). This longitudinal perspective shifts focus from PSPs as mere “gateways” to viewing them as foundational experiences equipping students with the tools to thrive throughout their academic journey.

The role of language proficiency is central to this process. Whilst advanced English skills are undeniably a prerequisite, contemporary research firmly positions them as a necessary but insufficient condition for academic readiness (Hughes and Clarke, 2021; British Council, 2022). The literature strongly advocates a shift from a deficit-oriented “skills” model towards an “academic literacy” paradigm (Lea and Street, 1998). The latter perspective views PSPs as instruments for socialisation into disciplinary discourse, embedding language development within authentic, subject-specific tasks (Hyland, 2004). This curriculum at University S, emphasising research-based tasks and subject-relevant content, embodies this principle by aiming to cultivate metacognitive awareness and academic identity rather than merely improving examination results. This approach facilitates quantifying the subject-specific academic language thresholds required for meaningful engagement – a critical issue raised by Hyatt (2013).

Moreover, the efficacy of PSPs is moderated by systemic and pedagogical factors. Institutional support mechanisms, such as academic mentoring following PSP completion, are crucial for ensuring a seamless and supportive transition from preparatory courses to degree programmes (Briguglio and Smith, 2012). The design of University S's programme (incorporating at least 20 hours of diverse learning activities weekly) reflects the consensus on good practice advocated within the EAP field by professional bodies such as BALEAP, which emphasises active learning, continuous formative assessment, and subject specificity (BALEAP, 2023; Baird, personal

communication, 2025). This consensus challenges the myth that academic writing constitutes a decontextualised universal skill, acknowledging instead that academic preparation is an ongoing process of cultural adaptation (Hyland, 2004). The preceding sections of my literature review, examining the globalised higher education context, theoretical frameworks of academic literacy, and specific challenges of language transition, collectively underscore the significant relevance and timeliness of this research.

2.6 Conclusion

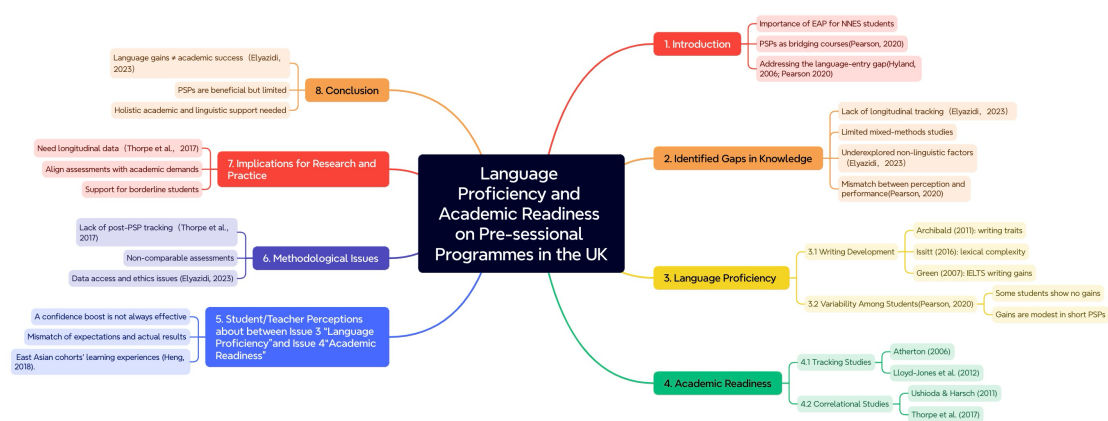


Figure 2-1: Literature Review on the Research (uncited views reflect the author's own)

Although literature reviews (as Figure 2-1 shows) provide useful benchmarks, they often fail to capture the complexity of academic literacy. Enhancing writing proficiency requires sustained practice and feedback, yet consensus remains elusive regarding the most effective corrective strategies. Acquiring academic vocabulary is paramount, yet integrating it within subject contexts remains challenging. PSPs aim to address these issues through structured, intensive language training, yet their long-term impact on students' linguistic competence and academic achievement remains contentious. Frameworks such as Reflexivity Theoretical Frameworks offer valuable guidance for PSP research design, helping ensure deeper, more enduring skill development. Furthermore, conceptualising PSP effectiveness through the three dimensions of “readiness, challenge, and support” (University of S, 2025) enables a more

comprehensive understanding of academic adaptation outcomes. Future research should explore how these frameworks can be practically applied to optimise PSP efficacy. My questions are as below:

Main Question:

How effective is a UK university pre-sessional programme (PSP) in supporting Chinese international students' academic success?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do students perceive the effectiveness of PSP activities (e.g., group discussions, presentations, academic writing, critical thinking tasks) in supporting their learning?
2. How do teachers perceive the impact of students' language development in PSP on their academic performance?

The literature reviewed highlights several limitations. Many studies rely on internal assessments or pre/post PSP comparisons, with few tracking long-term academic outcomes. Others lack control groups or fail to consider non-linguistic variables affecting academic performance (Pearson, 2020). My research would be capable of linking linguistic development to degree outcomes in a more holistic way.

3. Research Design

3.1 Introduction

My research was grounded in pragmatic paradigm, which integrated processual ontology (reality as dynamically co-constructed through iterative praxis), praxis-grounded epistemology (knowledge validated through contextualised problem-solving), and axiological commitments that emphasised ethical consequences and societal utility. Pragmatism permitted methodological flexibility to examine both measurable outcomes and contextual experiences, while elements of critical realism acknowledged the existence of an objective reality shaped by social and individual interpretations. Grounded in this philosophical approach, a holistic interpretation of participants'

educational development and their experiential narratives was achieved (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Accordingly, both quantitative measures (e.g., such as test scores, grades, etc. as implicit auxiliary data but not mentioned too much in the report) and qualitative insights (e.g., such as students' and teachers' perspectives as a basis for findings) were employed without assuming complete objectivity. Grounded in sociocultural theory, this study interpreted language acquisition and academic development as socially embedded processes, while reflexivity mitigated researcher bias, thereby integrating objective metrics with institutional dynamics (Consoli & Ganassin, 2022).

In addition, phenomenological perspectives were drawn upon to illuminate the essential characteristics of students' experiences and the deeper dimensions of their perceptions of academic and social processes. Phenomenology facilitated exploration of the factors underlying behavioural patterns and their relationship with environmental contexts—particularly how individuals perceived institutional and cultural conditions (Draucker, 1999). As Groenewald (2004) outlined, phenomenology encompassed descriptive and interpretative approaches, both of which emphasised consciousness as the foundation of human experience.

To address the research questions, three methodologies were selected: questionnaires, classroom observation, and interviews. The mix-method approach aims to mitigate potential biases or preconceptions, thereby yielding diverse, in-depth insights into the participants' perceptions. It facilitates an understanding of the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon at both contextual and individual levels (Groenewald, 2004). I tried to engage closely with the spaces and activities in which students participate to grasp their intrinsic significance. This approach proved particularly effective for emerging phenomena—such as those involving diverse PSP groups with varied Academic background in university disciplines and motivations within the current context of transition. Effective research necessitated attention to either the institutional backdrop (syllables, teaching outline, and policies, etc.) or insights into individual participants

(students, teachers, etc.) to delineate the landscape of practice and its meaning for those involved.

3.2 Sampling

My study focused on Chinese international students (18+) enrolled in PSPs in the UK, together with stakeholders such as the Programme Director (D1) and teaching staff (T1). Formal approval from D1 was obtained prior to recruitment. A convenience sampling approach was used to select T1, with whom I had an established professional rapport (however, I played the Outsider role in my research), ensuring access to classroom settings while retaining academic rigour. From the T1's teaching portfolio, a stratified random sampling method was applied to identify one intact classroom group (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018), which was studied to examine both immediate and longer-term outcomes related to language development and academic preparedness.

The process of data collection was executed through the utilisation of a mixed-methods design with questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Questionnaires were distributed to 10 students, who were selected through a probability-based random sampling stratified by discipline, with the application of anonymisation (e.g., S1, S2). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 volunteer students, 1 PSP director and 1 teaching staff, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of linguistic progress and pedagogical perspectives. A total of more than ten hours of classroom (C1) observations were conducted, utilising a structured protocol that was aligned with the Reflexivity Theoretical Frameworks. The observations focused on engagement and identity work. All participants were provided with information sheets and written consent was obtained in accordance with the BERA (2024) guidelines.

The sampling design was meticulously crafted to strike a balance between methodological robustness and feasibility. Despite its modest size (especially the data

analysis of the questionnaires is not ideal), the sample size proved sufficient to reach data saturation and furnish meaningful insights into PSP contexts. The inclusion criteria stipulated that student participants were required to be over the age of 18 and enrolled on the PSP, while staff participants were required to have a direct affiliation with the programme. The recruitment process was conducted in a manner that promoted transparency and voluntariness, with announcements made in the classroom and invitations disseminated via email. While it was acknowledged that one intact class might not be representative of the entire PSP landscape, the use of stratified selection reduced potential bias, and the triangulation of methods resulted in enhanced credibility. Reflexivity was identified as a pivotal concept in this study, with the acknowledgement that my role as an outsider.

3.3 Method

In the context of this study, which focused on language proficiency and academic readiness, questionnaires for PSP integrated established scales from prior research, demonstrating validity and reliability. It thereby served as a credible data reference for subsequent classroom observations and interviews. Phenomenological inquiry prioritises interviewing as its central methodological approach (Groenewald, 2004), and observations enabled identification of routine academic practices and communicative strategies employed by learners. With reference to and support from the preliminary questionnaire data, the 2 methods were of a qualitative and informal nature, and detailed field notes were compiled without the application of predetermined analytical frameworks. The approaches were adopted in alignment with the research aim of privileging participants' own interpretations of their engagement.

Method	Epistemological Function	Implementation Protocol	Validity Measures
Questionnaires	Quantifying affective variables (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010)	Likert-scale surveys with pilot testing (DeVellis, 2017)	Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.75$ (Field, 2018)

Observation	Recording behavioural authenticity (Angrosino, 2007)	Structured vs. participatory field notes (Emerson et al.,2011)	Inter-rater reliability ≥ 0.8 (Cohen's κ)
Interviews	Uncovering tacit learning barriers	Semi-structured protocol with critical incident technique	Thematic saturation

Table 3-1: Research Methods with PSP Applications (uncited views reflect the author's own)

Integration Sequence	Data Convergence Strategy	Theoretical Anchor	Pre-Sessional Case Application
Simultaneous	Method complementarity (Creswell & Plano Clark,2018)	Pragmatic parallelism (Morgan,2014)	Questionnaire on self-efficacy + Classroom observation notes
Sequential explanatory	Anomally investigation (Morse,2016)	Critical realism	Statistical outliers → Phenomenological interviews
Iterative reciprocal	Theory refinement	Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014)	Iterative coding cycles across all three datasets

Table 3-2: Triangulation for the Case Study of PSP (uncited views reflect the author's own)

3.3.1 Questionnaires

My study was supposed to use employs a 20-item, 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire, adapted from Dooley's (2010) Academic Literacy Development Inventory, in order to quantify the self-perceived language gains and academic socialisation progress of PSP participants and the ordinal structure of the data enables parametric analysis of longitudinal trends, which is critical for the evaluation of pedagogical interventions. A translation-back-translation protocol had been shown to ensure conceptual equivalence for Mandarin speakers, thereby mitigating cultural bias in self-assessment (Harkness et al., 2010). The instrument underwent initial validation with a cohort of 10 PSP participants, yielding strong reliability metrics (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$), higher than

Field's (2018) research mentioned in Table 3-1, which could provide basic but important evidence for observation and interview.

3.3.2 Observation

The second instrument utilised in the investigation was structured observation of the learning environment and its participants. This approach was essential for obtaining direct insight into the forms and quality of interactions within the PSP cohort, and for developing mutual understandings that later informed dialogues between the researcher and participants regarding their programme experiences. As MacDonald (2016) have argued, classroom observations yield a broader perspective on the contextual dynamics of educational phenomena, including patterns of communication and interpretation. Furthermore, as Ciesielska et al. (2018) emphasised, observational methods enabled researchers to document non-verbal cues, individual behaviours, and cultural practices that were integral to comprehending group dynamics. This, in turn, served to reduce the conceptual distance between the interviewer and the interviewees (Ciesielska et al., 2018). The programme was characterised by a consistent presence, which served to establish a shared reference point, thereby facilitating more in-depth discussion during subsequent interviews concerning individual practices and perceptions. My presence, as disclosed in participant information sheets and consent forms, may have influenced participants' level of engagement. Nevertheless, strategies were employed to minimise this potential influence by maintaining consistent engagement through semi-structured interviews, which fostered open dialogue and incorporated participant perspectives. Additionally, the researcher's presence was kept to a minimum, with no recording or systematic analysis of the interaction beyond the methods employed in other studies involving participants.

3.3.3 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the key method of data collection because their capacity to elicit detailed perceptions, emotions, and interpretations regarding online behaviours—central to the research aims. This approach facilitates a nuanced

understanding of socially situated phenomena while retaining flexibility to explore emergent themes (Leavy, 2017). Semi-structured interviews sit between predefined questioning and responsive dialogue, allowing for both thematic coverage and depth (Bihu, 2020). Guided by open-ended prompts rather than fixed questions, the method enables participants to articulate subjective experiences within a consistent analytical framework (Bryman, 2016). Its sensitivity to individual meaning-making aligns particularly well with investigations requiring contextual and interpretive depth.

I conducted them online via MS Teams, with participants including students- S1, S2, S3, S4&S5, (Mandarin-English, reciprocally interpreted interviews, 2 times each, in total 221 mins), T1(English language interviews, 2 times, in total 124 mins), and D1(English language interviews 2 times, in total 95 mins) from the PSP at the University of S. Each interview began with a warm-up question to break the ice and the number of questions posed varied depending on the individual, as well as the direction of discussion between interviews and the participants' willingness to share. By the time I interviewed the 7th participant, the 14th time overall, I felt my questions had nearly been answered. Then the answers were thematically coded and analysed using Wordsift and NVivo.

To uncover participants' perceptions, experiences, thoughts, and viewpoints regarding the relationship between language proficiency and academic readiness, the interviews were examining these at multiple levels:

Micro level: How this relationship manifests in daily practices, behaviours, interactions, etc.;

Meso level: How they engage with pedagogical frameworks, EAP policies, and objectives;

Macro level: How they relate to participants' future roles, programme development, and so forth.

3.4 Data collection process

It is noteworthy that my engagement with the PSP began as early as 2024. Consequently, the types of PSP data analysed initially derived from publicly available online sources, including core programme documents such as course materials, including assessment briefs, module outlines, and programme details. On the 8th of July, 2025, formal approval for access to the PSP was secured from programme management, ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant committee, and informed consent was acquired from all participating students prior to data collection. The data collection began and I examined more materials that students typically encounter, such as instructional guidelines, learning resources, informational documents, and task descriptions. The process of analysis followed a staged approach: beginning with skimming, progressing to close reading, and culminating in the categorisation of key points for interpretation (Dooey, 2010). The methodological approach adopted a non-linear design, with multiple methods being implemented concurrently throughout the research process.

	Description (Adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019)	Reflexive Note on my Study of PSP
1. Familiarisation with Data	Immerse myself in PSP datasets (interviews, observations, documents of PSP). Read/re-read transcripts actively, noting initial observations on student/staff experiences.	Highlight recurring mentions of 'language anxiety' or 'transition challenges'.
2. Generating Initial Codes	Systematically label features of the data relevant to PSP research questions. Apply reflexive codes. Codes reflect both semantic content and researcher interpretation.	Codes related with 'Staff assumptions about proficiency gaps', 'Student self-perceived readiness', etc.

3. Searching for Themes	Collate codes into potential themes. Organise data extracts showing patterns across PSP stakeholder groups.	Themes like ' Ability to engage in critical discussions ', etc.
4. Reviewing Themes	Level 1: Check coherence against coded extracts. Level 2: Validate against entire dataset. Reflexive practice: question how positionality shapes theme development.	E.g., Does 'Assessment Literacy' capture PSP writing challenges?
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Articulate each theme's essence and relevance. Use analytical names and link to literature.	
6. Producing the Analysis	Weave themes into a coherent narrative about PSP mechanisms. Use vivid data extracts to illustrate arguments.	E.g., student quotes on 'writing paralysis'.

Table 3-3: Research under Reflexivity Theoretical Frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

The theoretical framework employed has been demonstrated to be conducive to the analysis of PSP data. However, its application was insufficient to fully capture the complexity experienced by the participants. Despite the substantial foundation provided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step reflexive thematic analysis, it was evident that certain variations in the accounts of the participants could not be readily incorporated into the prevailing coding framework. Consequently, a deliberate adjustment was made, incorporating additional reflexive practices, such as repeatedly examining the coding and aligning with academic standards. The present study drew upon the theoretical framework of the 'limit concept' (Meyer & Land, 2005) to explore the implications of methodological adjustments. These adjustments not only enhanced the richness and context-sensitivity of the analysis, but also underscored the reflexive nature of the researcher, acknowledging the influence of the researcher's perspective on the study's outcomes. From this perspective, the adjustments made to the framework itself serve as

compelling evidence for the dynamic and reflexive characteristics of the research process. This assertion was further reinforced by the findings of academic discourse on methodological flexibility (Nowell et al., 2017).

Date	Class	Session Type	Notes
09/07/2025 – 15/07/2025	Class C1	Academic Writing	Days 1–7: Observation, questionnaires distribution and compile auxiliary statistics
23/07/2025	Class C1	Assessment Session	Midway observation and student interviews
23/07/2025	Class C1	Semi-structured Interviews	With 3 students during pre- and post- assessment
11/08/2025	Class C1	Final Summary Session	Observation at the end of the programme and interview with the same 3 students

Table 3-4: Timetable for Applying the Research Method

In my research, selecting different stages to methods was intended to capture the dynamic and complex nature of the learning process. Firstly, observations of Class C1 from Days 1 to 7 allowed me to finish questionnaire (trial distribution and trial statistics), record students' initial adaptation, including language anxiety, participation patterns, and early responses to teaching. This provided a baseline for later comparisons. Secondly, midway observations on Day 15 during the assessment, combined with semi-structured interviews, reflected students' progress in academic language while also revealing their psychological responses and strategic adjustments when facing high-stakes evaluation. The integration of classroom data and interviews enhanced the depth of analysis. Finally, the observation of the concluding session on Day 34, after the final assessment, offered a reflective view of students' overall learning trajectory. This stage highlighted self-efficacy, and readiness for academic study, enabling a more comprehensive interpretation of how the PSP influenced students' linguistic development and academic preparedness.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Finding 1: Alignment and Misalignment of Perspectives among Different Stakeholders

The following figures (as Figure 4-1, 4-2 showed) visualized the most frequent terms from student and teacher interviews regarding the impact of PSP. The size of each word corresponded to its frequency in the qualitative data. The blue markings represented keywords filtered by the academic vocabulary tagging function of the Wordsift.org and they were thematically coded and analysed by NVivo.

4.1.1 From Students' Perspectives



Figure 4-1: Word Cloud of Student Interview Data (Source: Wordsift.org)

The analysis of student interview data revealed academic challenges, characterised by recognised skill acquisition. Based on the word cloud generated from student responses in interviews, Students frequently associated the PSP with **skill development**—particularly in *academic writing*, *critical thinking*, and *group discussions*—reflecting the programme's focus on core academic literacies. Words such as “language,” “skill,” and “critical” suggested that students recognised the PSP’s role in enhancing abilities essential for success in UK academia. As S1 noted following a formative assessment in

the PSP's third week, *"The constant focus on structuring essays and using sources correctly, though rather demanding, was immensely beneficial. Before this, I was quite unaware of what critical analysis truly entailed; I simply summarised. Now, I am beginning to question the author's argument and evaluate the evidence, which is what my department expects."* This reflected the programme's success in explicitly teaching what Wingate (2015) terms "academic literacy," moving students from descriptive to more analytical writing.

The presence of terms such as "group" and "talk" highlighted the importance of collaborative learning, yet also hinted at possible anxieties around communicative confidence. Similarly, "culture" and "different" suggested an awareness of the cultural dimensions of academic practice, supporting the view that PSPs served not only as linguistic but also socio-academic bridging initiatives (Gill, 2007). The transition to participative classroom dynamics was frequently cited as a difficulty. S3, when discussing group discussions, stated, *"It was a challenge, truly. Back home, we listen to the professor; here, we are asked to constantly give our own opinion and debate. It felt uncomfortable at first, as if disagreeing was impolite. The PSP provided a safe space to practise, but I still find it difficult to interject smoothly in a fast-moving conversation with native speakers."* This experience aligned with research by Gu and Maley (2008), highlighting the dissonance between Eastern knowledge-transmission and Western dialogic learning models.

However, words like "critical" "challenge" and "question" indicated that students encountered significant hurdles. The transition to Western academic norms—especially critical thinking and participative discourse—was perceived as demanding. This corresponded to research by Gu and Maley (2008), who noted that Chinese students often struggled with the interactive and critical expectations commonplace in UK classrooms. *"The most valuable thing wasn't just the language, but the 'thinking in English'—understanding the underlying cultural values in the questions we were asked. "' My tutor kept asking 'so what?' and 'why does this matter?'. It was frustrating initially,*

collaboration, were particularly effective in academic language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978). However, the prominence of ‘change’ and ‘need’ suggested a recognised shortfall; teachers were acutely aware that while the PSP provided essential foundational skills, the linguistic and cognitive demands of postgraduate study required sustained development beyond the programme. The coupling of ‘critical’ with ‘thinking’ and ‘academic’ showcased a primary goal: to move students beyond grammatical competence towards the higher-order reasoning prized in UK academia. This transition was often where the most significant challenge lied, as students must learn to engage with knowledge critically, not just receptively (Lea & Street, 1998).

T1, a senior EAP tutor with 12 years of experience on the PSP, articulated the challenge of fostering criticality within time constraints: *"One observes a marked improvement in their grammatical accuracy and report writing by the end of the ten weeks. The real hurdle, however, is getting them to confidently challenge a text's premises in a seminar. They become proficient in the language of description, but the leap to the language of critical argument—embedding a counter-claim with suitable hedging, for instance—that often remains a work in progress. The programme plants the seed, but it requires further nurturing within their degree programmes."*

Echoing this sentiment from a strategic perspective, **D1**, the PSP Director with 17 years of experience on the PSP, highlighted the institutional mechanisms designed to address this very issue: *"Our internal tracking shows PSP alumni consistently achieve higher marks in their initial master's assignments compared to direct entrants. The key isn't just teaching them English; it's equipping them with the analytical framework to deconstruct an assignment brief. We've embedded a continuous feedback loop between our PSP staff and the departmental tutors. This ensures we're not working in a vacuum but are directly addressing the specific academic literacy practices they will immediately need, thereby making the transition less abrupt and more managed."*

4.1.3 High Readability: A Cornerstone of Reliability and Validity

Readability

Automated Readability Index	3.9
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	3.3
Coleman-Liau Index	10.2
SMOG Grade	8.3
Average Grade Level	6.4
Flesch Reading Ease	87.0

Equation 4-1: The Analysis of Readability for All Interviews (Source: wordsift.org)

Based on the provided readability metrics of these 2-word clouds (Average Grade Level: 6.4; Flesch Reading Ease: 87.0), the interview questions and subsequent data were highly accessible, ensuring clear comprehension and reducing the potential for misinterpretation. This high level of clarity enhances the **internal validity** of the study, as participants' responses were based on a sound understanding of the inquiries posed (Shenton, 2004).

The convergence of perspectives between the operational staff and strategic management further strengthens the study's **confirmability**. T1, a senior tutor, observed: *"The leap from linguistic competence to critical academic discourse remains the most significant hurdle. The programme provides the tools, but their application within a disciplinary context is the true challenge."* This was directly corroborated by D1, the Director of PSP, from a strategic viewpoint: *"Our internal audits consistently show PSP alumni are better prepared to engage with their academic school's literacy practices, though continued subject-specific support is imperative for sustained success."* This alignment between frontline experience and institutional data underscored the trustworthiness and **dependability** of the research findings.

4.2 Finding 2: Teaching Framework - Beyond Proficiency to Practice

The observational data compellingly validated that these three components were not merely isolated activities but formed an interconnected ecosystem that directly fostered academic readiness. In classroom, it was confirmed that students demonstrated emerging criticality by building on peers' ideas and questioning readings, albeit with varying degrees of fluency. The recorded instructions acted as a critical scaffold; observations noted that students who engaged with these materials prior to seminars entered discussions with greater confidence and a clearer framework for contribution, directly enhancing their ability to manage the academic task at hand. Subsequently, peer collaboration tasks, observed during breakout sessions, revealed how learners negotiated meaning, co-constructed knowledge, and provided informal linguistic feedback to one another. This practice was instrumental in lowering the affective filter, allowing students to trial academic language and argumentation in a less formal setting before applying it in plenary discussions. The observational data clearly indicated that language proficiency was a facilitating factor, but not the sole determinant of participation; the architectural support of the teaching framework enabled students to leverage their existing skills more effectively within authentic academic contexts.

From the perspective of the Tri-Helix Framework mentioned in University of S—mandating research-orientation, educational excellence, and scholarly integration—this teaching framework demonstrates a direct alignment. The research-oriented principle was evident in the seminar discussions that mirrored postgraduate-level critical analysis, moving beyond knowledge consumption to its critique and application. The pursuit of excellence was embodied in the inclusive, student-centred design advocated by the director (D1, personal interview, 2025). Observations objectively confirmed this inclusivity: the multi-modal approach (synchronous/asynchronous, individual/collaborative) catered to diverse learning preferences and proficiency levels, ensuring that excellence was defined by engagement and intellectual growth rather than mere linguistic accuracy. Finally, the integration with scholarly research was evident in

the very tasks set for students, which often involved analysing and discussing genuine research papers, thereby immersing them directly in the scholarly community's practices.

In conclusion, the reflexive thematic analysis of observations showed PSP aimed to move students beyond proficiency toward practice, equipping them with the demonstrable academic readiness required to navigate and contribute to their future scholarly environments.

4.3 Finding 3: E-folders as a Bridge, Make the Invisible to Visible

Pre-sessional 6 2025 Progress Log/Record of change

Student record of work and progress to be kept and updated in student folder.

Tutor note: the table below should be filled in by the student as they make progress on their title and essay. Students will then copy the table below into their formative and summative writing assignments as part of the submitted document.

Example:

Student name:

Area of focus	
Specific question	
What needs to be addressed to answer this question? How will you address it in your writing?	

Tutor note: You will see below that the part this document plays in the monitoring of 'own work'/academic integrity is stated explicitly to the student. Note that this will stop in Week 9 as this is submission week.

This document serves three purposes.

1. It allows your tutor to follow what you are doing and to better advise and guide you. This will also make tutorials more effective, and easier for both you and your tutor by having a focus for discussions, issues and questions prepared, and recording the advice you are given to take forward.
2. It forms notes and ideas in preparation for writing your 'Explanation of Writing' – 20% of your formative and summative Writing Tasks. This asks you to present and explain changes you have made through the writing process. Thus, it allows you to record changes you make to how you are working: your thinking about and approach to your task, your research and reading, your use of sources, planning, drafting etc.
3. If at any time on the programme, or after submission, there is any suspicion regarding Academic Responsibility and Conduct, this document and other contents in your folder will show that your work is your own and how you produced it. Thus, it is a record of your writing and learning process.
4. After the programme, this document can be kept and used as a reminder of what you did on the programme, what problems you had, and how you managed, which may help you when undertaking similar tasks on your future degree programme.

Tutor notes:

The onus is on the student to work with and complete the table below, which has five separate horizontal sections. However, tutors are responsible for ensuring students know they need to do this and are doing it.

For tutors, this document will be useful and necessary for tutorials. Before a tutorial, students should already have written something in Section 1 at least.

Sections 1 & 2: This can form the opening of any tutorial with questions such as, 'what have you been reading?' 'How does this impact your thesis?' 'What conclusion might this lead to or affect in your essay?' 'How might this change/develop a paragraph/its purpose or structure?' 'How does that relate to other sources/ideas?' what other information might you need to find to develop/support this?' Are there sources that may challenge this?' etc.

Section 3 may be filled in during the tutorial by either the student or the tutor. It will serve as a record for the student and guide their work thereafter.

Extract 4-1: Progress Log from E-Folder (Source: University of S)

Beyond the macro-level teaching framework of synchronous seminars and peer collaboration, a significant finding emerged from the analysis of pedagogical artefacts, specifically the **'Progress Log/Record of Change'** embedded within the programme's E-folder system. This tool was not merely an administrative requirement but functioned

as a catalytic instrument that actively fostered the metacognitive development and academic acculturation of Chinese students.

The primary value of the Progress Log lay in its structured prompting for **reflection and dialogue**, effectively bridging the gap between tutor guidance and student self-regulation. By requiring students to weekly articulate their work, questions, and subsequent actions, the log institutionalised a practice of reflective learning (Schön, 1983). This practice is crucial for academic readiness, as it moves students beyond the passive reception of feedback towards an active engagement with their own learning trajectory. For Chinese students, who may be more accustomed to knowledge-transmission models of education (Heng, 2018), this tool provided a sanctioned and guided space to voice uncertainties and articulate their thinking process, a key step in adapting to Western academic expectations of criticality and self-expression. The log's sections, particularly "What actions you took following tutorials/advice" and the explicit prompt to identify "change", compelled students to connect feedback to action, thereby fostering a sense of agency. This aligns with models of **self-regulated learning (SRL)**, where planning, monitoring, and adapting are core components (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). The E-folder, therefore, acted as a scaffolded SRL environment, guiding students to gradually internalise the habits of mind necessary for independent study on their future degree programmes.

The dialogues observed and recounted in interviews underscored this point. Tutor T1 explained the log's purpose succinctly: *"It's about making the invisible visible. We move from 'my essay is bad' to 'in paragraph three, my topic sentence isn't supported by evidence from my reading—I need to find a better source or rework my argument.' This precision is the foundation of academic work."* This statement highlights the log's role in cultivating disciplinary literacy (Lea & Street, 2006). Furthermore, Director D1 framed this tool within the Tri-Helix mission, stating, *"Excellence in education isn't just about the final grade; it's about the quality of the intellectual journey. The Progress Log is our mechanism to ensure that journey is research-oriented and rigorous. It provides tangible evidence of the student's engagement with knowledge creation, not*

just consumption.” Here, D1 explicitly links the tool to the model’s emphasis on research-oriented practice and excellence, positioning the E-folder as a microcosm of the university’s scholarly enterprise.

For the present study, the conceptualisation of the Progress Log proved to be of immense value. It served as a rich, longitudinal data source that documented the *process* of academic development, rather than merely the *product*. While final essays showcased linguistic proficiency, the logs revealed the struggles, adaptations, and metacognitive breakthroughs behind them. They provided empirical evidence of how language proficiency was deployed and developed in the service of academic tasks—for instance, showing how a student’s lexical repertoire expanded (*language proficiency*) as they learned to summarise and critique complex sources (*academic readiness*). This triangulates with interview data where students reported feeling more “in control” of their writing process. The logs thus offered a unique window into the iterative and often non-linear journey of academic socialisation, a dimension often missed by standardised assessments (Lillis & Scott, 2007).

In conclusion, the E-folder’s Progress Log was far more than a record-keeping exercise. For Chinese students, it provided a crucial scaffold for the transition from a proficiency-focused mindset to a practice-oriented scholarly identity, making it a vital component in the development of genuine academic readiness.

5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The key findings were synthesised within the broader empirical research on PSP and bridged the critical gap between demonstrable academic readiness and abstract language proficiency.

While findings affirm the framework's role in facilitating this transition, the discussion adopts a necessary critically reflexive stance. Maintaining the position of an external researcher, this chapter consciously avoids presupposing causal efficacy, acknowledging critiques such as Thorpe et al.'s (2017) regarding PSPs' impact on these specific dimensions. The analysis remains grounded in the empirical data to evaluate the programme's outcomes objectively.

5.2 Limitations and Reflections on Data Collection

Firstly, the targeted focus on Chinese students, while addressing a significant demographic gap in the literature, inherently limited the generalisability of the findings. The PSP literature had expanded in recent years, yet there remains a relative scarcity of empirical work focused specifically on Chinese students, who constituted one of the largest cohorts in UK higher education (Heng, 2018). This study sought to address this gap by concentrating explicitly on Chinese learners; however, the relatively small, homogenous sample size meant the findings could not be readily extrapolated to the experiences of students from other linguistic or cultural backgrounds, or indeed to all Chinese students in different institutional contexts. The sociocultural complexities of academic adaptation were highly particular (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). What facilitates academic readiness for a Chinese student might differ for a student from, for example, the Middle East or Southern Europe. Nevertheless, as argued by Wallace (2020), narrowly focused qualitative studies could yield "propositional generalisability" – they offered rich, meaningful empirical insights into under-researched subgroups, generating hypotheses and theoretical propositions for wider testing, rather than seeking statistical representativeness.

Secondly, the chosen methodology presented its own set of constraints. Although the mixed-methods approach provided context in depth, the scale of the quantitative component was limited. The small sample size for the quantitative data on linguistic gains (e.g., analyses of lexical complexity) meant that statistical power was low. While

these metrics served as a useful auxiliary to the qualitative findings, offering a tentative snapshot of development, they were insufficient to make robust claims about causal relationships between the PSP and specific linguistic outcomes. Future studies would benefit from a larger-scale quantitative dimension, capable of employing multivariate analysis to isolate the impact of specific teaching interventions. Integrating such quantitative measures of linguistic gains with the deep qualitative explorations of identity and acculturation undertaken here could yield a more comprehensive and compelling understanding.

Thirdly, regarding data collection, the number of interview participants was constrained by practical and access limitations. While the data gathered was rich, a larger interview cohort would have captured a wider spectrum of student experiences. Furthermore, the study's cross-sectional nature, confined to the duration of the PSP, provided only a snapshot of the students' journey. A more longitudinal design, tracking students into their first term of postgraduate study, would be invaluable in assessing the sustainability of the academic readiness skills developed during the pre-sessional period. As noted by Wingate (2015), the true test of an EAP intervention was not performance on the programme itself, but successful transfer of skills to the disciplinary context.

5.3 Contributions to the Field

Despite these limitations, the research would make some contributions to the field of PSP research.

Primarily, it responds to repeated calls for more empirically grounded, context-rich studies of PSPs (Hyland, 2016; Charles & Pecorari, 2016). It provides much-needed empirical insight into the experiences of Chinese students in PSPs, highlighting not only the areas of significant progress—such as gains in lexical complexity and nominalisation observed in writing samples—but also the persistent challenges in critical thinking and discipline-specific adaptation (Green, 2007; Thorpe et al., 2017).

The mixed-methods approach adopted here helps illuminate the dissonance between surface-level indicators of programme effectiveness (e.g., high pass rates) and the underlying academic struggles revealed in interviews and observations, thereby complicating the often-overly simplistic narrative of PSPs as a straightforward pathway to academic success.

Moreover, the study offers an empirical validation of a specific teaching framework. It moves beyond programme self-evaluation by using independent observation to demonstrate how the integration of research-orientation, excellence, and scholarly integration functions in practice. For instance, the finding on academic writing principles enabled more confident participation in synchronous seminars illustrates a tangible link between scaffolded, student-centred pedagogy (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005) and the development of metacognitive tools for academic participation. This tripartite model ensures that the programme moves beyond merely improving linguistic proficiency towards its core mission: equipping students with the metacognitive, practical, and critical tools necessary for successful participation in UK higher education. It validates the director's assertion that readiness is a multifaceted construct, distinct from, though related to, standardised language test scores.

Finally, by critically engaging with the methodological shortcomings prevalent in the existing literature—such as overreliance on course-internal assessments and lack of comparative control groups—this study reinforces the need for more longitudinal, and theory-informed evaluations of preparatory programmes (Ushioda & Harsch, 2011). It is hoped that these findings will inform more nuanced EAP curriculum designs that better address the specific transitional needs of Chinese international students, contributing to a more inclusive and effective pedagogical practice.

5.4 Identifying Future Research Gaps

5.4.1 Beyond the Chinese Student Cohort

While this study focused on Chinese students, a significant gap remains in comparative research. Future studies should investigate whether the teaching framework and its outcomes are consistent across diverse student nationalities. For example, do students from educational backgrounds with stronger traditions of critical debate (e.g., from some European or North American contexts) benefit in qualitatively different ways? Research employing a comparative case study design could explore how the Tri-Helix model's implementation interacts with varied prior educational experiences, leading to more universally applicable or differentially targeted pedagogical principles (Montgomery, 2010).

5.4.2 Ethical Discussion on Triangulation in Linguistically Diverse Cohorts

The limited scale of the quantitative component in this study highlights a gap for more sophisticated, large-scale mixed-methods research. A future study could employ a pre-test/post-test design with a larger cohort, using corpus linguistics tools to meticulously track linguistic development in writing (e.g., complexity, accuracy, fluency) alongside repeated qualitative interviews. This would allow me to correlate specific linguistic gains with students' perceived confidence and observed competencies, creating a more powerful, integrated model for assessing efficacy. This approach aligns with an Integrated Framework for Efficacy that seeks to bridge the often-divergent paradigms of psychometrics and sociocultural theory (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

The pursuit of methodological triangulation in linguistically diverse cohorts introduces unique ethical complexities that demand careful consideration. Firstly, the issue of instrument validity becomes paramount. When standardised questionnaires lack cross-cultural and linguistic equivalence (Byrne, 2016), their solitary use risks misrepresenting participants' competencies. Observation thus becomes not just a methodological choice but an ethical imperative for contextual disambiguation, ensuring interpretations are grounded in authentic practice rather than potentially flawed metrics. Secondly, positionality risks are amplified when tutors act as researcher-participants. The inherent power dynamic can foster "observational

desirability bias," where students perform according to perceived expectations. Mitigating this requires rigorous reflexivity, documented through reflective memos to disentangle researcher influence from participant behaviour (Pinner, 2019). Finally, ethical tensions around data ownership and anonymity require renegotiation within collectivist participant frameworks, which may contrast sharply with Western individualistic norms of research consent. Consequently, effective and ethical practice in this context demands a decolonial recalibration of research designs (Smith, 2021), prioritising contextual integrity over procedural standardisation.

5.4.3 Deepening the Evaluation of Academic Writing Development

A third gap, specific to the teaching framework at University S, concerns the assessment of progress in online academic writing. Regarding academic writing as a case in my study, after obtaining authorisation from University of S, I observed the ongoing PSP course since 8th of July, then on days 2, 5, 6, 7, 15, 31 of the 6-week PSP (before the course, during the course, and one day before the presentation, totaling 10.5 hours), primarily focusing on the writing classes of the students and teachers I was about to interview. Fortunately, I was able to review Student S1's E-folder with progress records from each writing class, and S1 also agreed to be interviewed after a writing quiz. As the 1st attempt, observing the use of e-folders for writing tasks could not conduct a fine-grained analysis of the drafting process, but for future research I should incorporate a progress log methodology, digitally tracking student engagement with feedback on multiple drafts within the e-folder system. By analysing how students revise their work in response to tutor and peer feedback over time, unprecedented insight could be gained into the development of their academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2006). This would move beyond the final product to understand the process of learning, evaluating the efficacy on writing and peer collaboration in fostering metacognitive awareness and self-regulatory skills (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011).

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, my case study has acknowledged the limitations inherent in the focus and methodology, while arguing for the substantive contributions it makes through its empirical, context-sensitive analysis of a PSP teaching framework. However, the study also reveals the complexity of this development, particularly for Chinese students navigating profound academic cultural shifts. By pinpointing specific gaps for future research—ranging from comparative cohort studies to technologically-enhanced tracking of writing processes—if I would continue this study, this chapter aims to contribute to a more sophisticated, critical, and ultimately more effective discourse surrounding pre-sessional provision in higher education.

6. Recommendations

As an outsider to the PSP in University S, I have strived throughout this research to adopt a consistently self-critical approach. For instance, while Thorpe et al. (2017) casts doubt on the efficacy of PSPs—particularly concerning the dimensions of language proficiency and academic readiness I explored—my own hypothesis remained neutral, grounded in empirical investigation. I consciously avoided presupposing that students demonstrably enhanced their academic readiness solely through participation in the PSP.

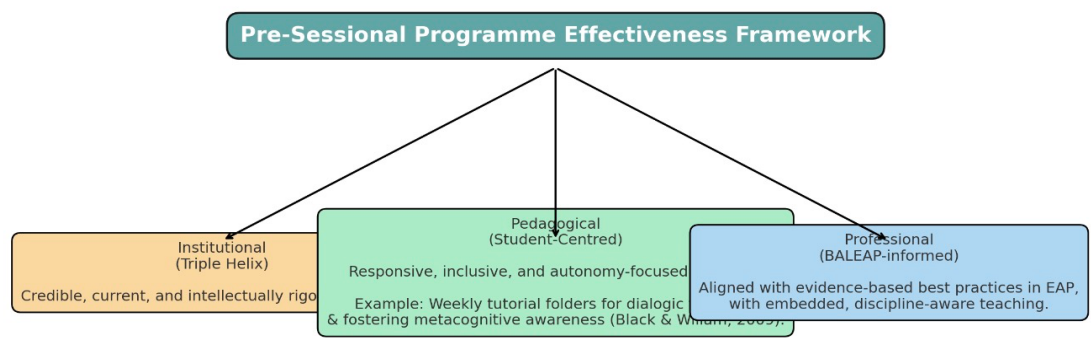


Figure 6-1: The Triple Helix Framework for PSP (Source: Author's Own)

My case study demonstrates that the efficacy of University of S's PSP stems from a powerful synthesis of three guiding principles, as illustrated in Figure 6-1: the Institutional (Triple Helix) mandate for research-orientation and excellence; the Pedagogical (Student-Centred) commitment to fostering learner autonomy through

reflective tools like progress logs; and the Professional (BALEAP-informed) adherence to evidence-based EAP practice (BALEAP, 2018; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). This integrated framework ensures the programme transcends mere language training to cultivate academically-ready, critical thinkers by making the synergy between institutional strategy, responsive teaching, and professional standards explicit.

For broader applicability, it is recommended that PSPs globally adopt this tripartite model. By demonstrating one PSP is a product of specific contextual factors, my study critiques the uncritical exportability of pedagogical models. True effectiveness, it contends, is achieved not through replication, but through the critical recalibration of tools like the progress log to sustain a context-sensitive synthesis. Consequently, this work calls for future research—particularly longitudinal and comparative studies with programmes such as Academic Chinese (预科考试, YuKe KaoShi)—to extend this critical lens, interrogating the framework's long-term impact and challenging its limits across diverse environments.

Ultimately, my research demonstrates that a programme's transformative potential is maximised through the deliberate synergy of its core components, not isolated interventions. The case of University S offers a replicable blueprint, arguing that true effectiveness lies in empowering students to become autonomous, critical participants in their scholarly communities (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). The integrated framework presented in the research provides a model for navigating the complex transition from language proficiency to academic readiness in PSPs. It is hoped that this work will serve as a foundation for future research in this area.

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Appendices

(To be uploaded in a separate folder in

<https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/course/section.php?id=171809>.)